FEB. 1959

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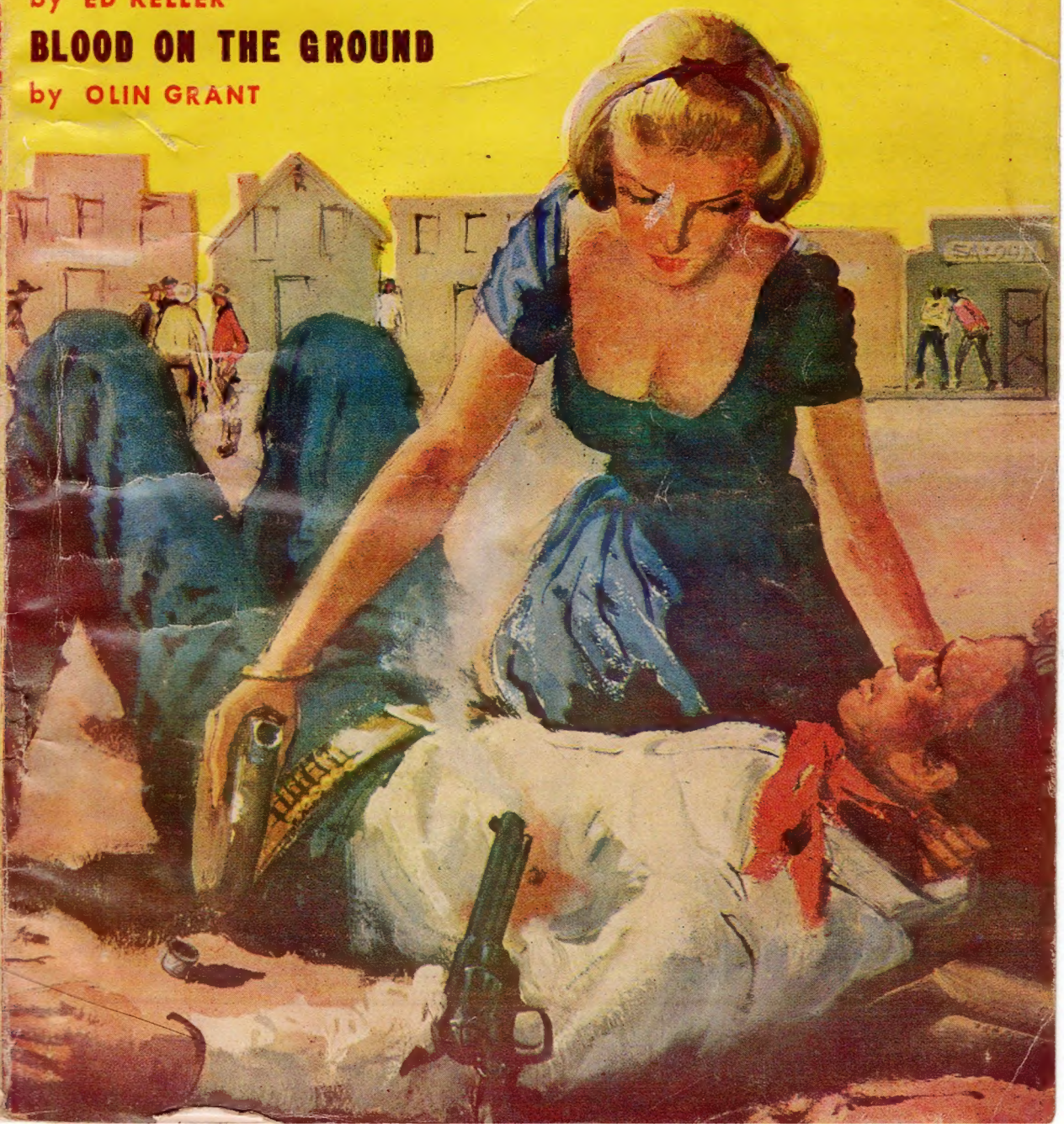
## SIX-GUN MUSIC
by ED KELLER

## BLOOD ON THE GROUND
by OLIN GRANT

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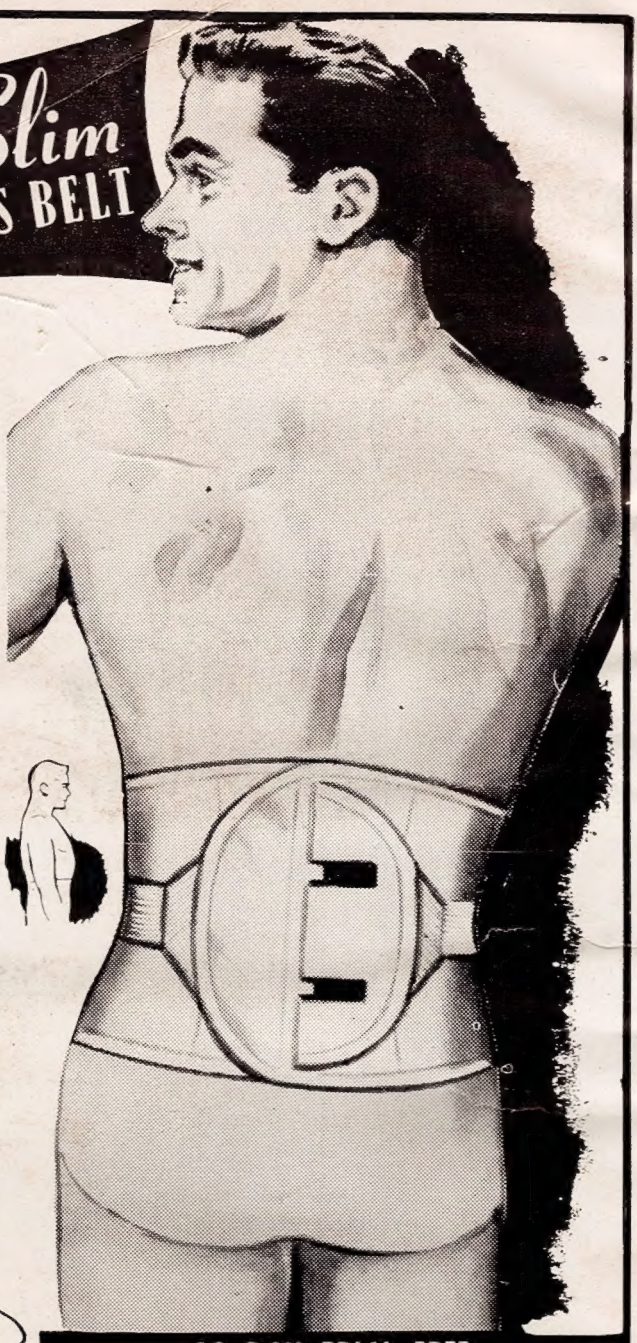

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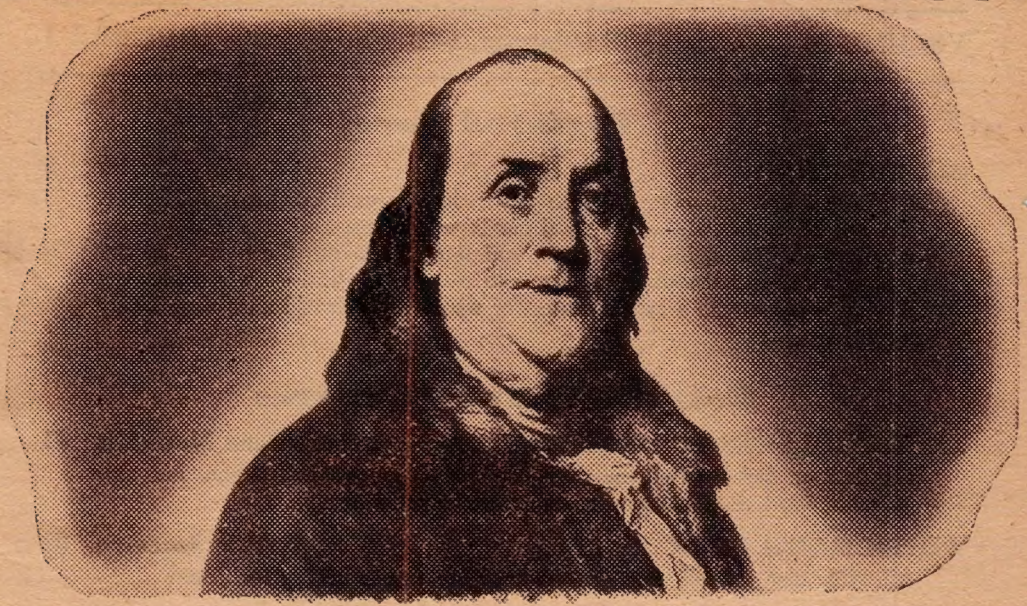

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# DOUBLE-ACTION WESTERN

VOLUME 26 February, 1959 NUMBER 3

## *Featured Novel*

**SIX-GUN MUSIC** ..... **Ed Keller** 6

It wasn't a new situation, but Joan Jensen had never lived through it before. She and her father, and a few loyal hands, were alone against a land-grabber, who had the law in his vest pocket, and intended to run the town, too. But Johnny Morgan had some extra jokers to play in this deal — which involved getting in touch with a bandit leader for whom Morgan had once done a very big favor.

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ROBERT A. W. LOWNDES, *Editor* MARIE ANTOINETTE PARK, *Asso. Ed.*

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"I was able to play many pieces in a short time. Course opened door to popularity, wider circle of friends."—Peter H. Kozyra, P.O. Brokenhead, Manitoba. (Picture at left)

**Now Invited Out Lots**

"It's been fun. Hasn't cost anywhere near as much as private teacher. Now invited to affairs, dances."—Howard Hopkins, E. Syracuse, N. Y. (Picture at left)

**Now Plays at Church**

"I had tried several times to start music lessons. I had been depending on a teacher before. Now I play at church, etc."—Mrs. P. J. Tatman, Sycamore, Illinois.

*Novel of Satan's Range*

by Ed Keller

★
★
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★

# SIX-GUN MUSIC

***The fact that this was an old story didn't make Joan Jensen's position any easier. She, her father, and the few hands who stood by them, were being overwhelmed by a neighbor who didn't hesitate to employ renegades, or to corrupt the law. But Johnny Morgan had an ace to play when he drew chips in this game . . .***

JOHNNY MORGAN didn't know what the full set-up was, but he sure knew a cold deck of cards when he saw one. And he saw one now. He picked up his hand and fanned out a row of pictures which included four kings. A good hand to bet on, if only it hadn't been dealt from the bottom.

Back in Texas, where Johnny came from, they had a way of fixing hombres who dealt from the bottom of the deck. But this wasn't Texas. It was Sweetwater, Wyoming, one of those small cowtowns where a stranger was regarded with suspicion even before he made trouble.

Johnny was in a spot. The saloon was jammed full of drinkers and loungers, and they were no friends of Morgan. He'd only been in Sweetwater a couple of days, but that should have been long enough for him to catch on. He cursed himself for getting into this poker game. It was going to be harder to get out of it.

If he called the dealer a cheat there would be a ruckus. In a ruckus somebody was liable to be killed, and it wasn't likely to be Johnny. But if he beat the dealer to the draw, he'd be lucky to get out of the saloon alive. At any rate, he wasn't going to bet on a stacked hand, so there was only one way out.

"You want cards?" the dealer said. He was a squat man with slitted eyes

Joan Jensen was ready to help with the defense...

and no hair or eyebrows. Around his bulky middle he wore a gunbelt, and in Johnny's expert opinion its forty-four was holstered a bit too far forward. Idly he thought: *I could let him touch the butt, then beat him.*

"No cards," Morgan said.

The man at his left bought two. The dealer peeled off one for himself, which made Johnny smile. The lanky puncher at his right bet a few dollars, sliding them to the center. All eyes turned to Morgan.

Johnny smiled a lean smile at the dealer—and threw in his hand. He said, "I'll sit it out, gents."

"What?" The squat man stared, a vicious twist to his mouth. He looked at Morgan, then at the fancy backs of the discarded cards on the table, like a man doubting his senses. But he didn't meet Johnny's smiling gaze again. The young Texan thought: *He knows that I know, and if he's wise he'll leave it at that.*

The beetle-browed hombre at Morgan's left made a small bet, and the bald-headed dealer covered it. The lanky puncher dropped out. Beetle-brow raised the ante. Johnny wondered whether he was playing square or just putting on a show of playing square.

BALDY COVERED the bet and added ten dollars. That seemed to discourage Beetle-brow. He slid ten dollars to the center and said, "I'm callin' you. What've you got?"

*Four aces,* Johnny thought. The squat man tossed his cards on the table. Four aces. He said, "I was kinda lucky...bought the fourth."

*Liar,* Johnny thought, knowing full well that the aces had been stacked like his own kings. The lanky puncher gathered in the cards to shuffle, but Johnny leaned back in his chair.

"Deal me out," he said. "Reckon I'll mosey along."

"What?" The bald, squat man twisted his lips suddenly. "We only played a few hands. What's your hurry?"

Johnny scooped up the twelve dollars he'd won in the first couple of hands, and jammed them in his black shirt pocket. He pushed back his chair and stood up. The squat man said, "In this town, stranger, we don't pull out of a game as soon as we're a few dollars ahead. You better sit down."

"I pull out when I wanta," Johnny Morgan said. And he was thinking quickly. *The lights. There're just two, hangin' from the rafters, and in a ruckus they're my best bet.*

"Mebbe you don't like the company," Baldy sneered. In this roomful of like characters, he felt safe against a stranger. He was out for trouble, and Johnny made up his mind to it.

"All right," he said softly, the smile lighting his lean face. "Since you ask for it, I don't like stacked hands. I'm kinda superstitious 'bout bein' dealt four kings from the bottom—and think twice 'bout goin' for your gun, Baldy, because you haven't got a chance. I'm warnin' you."

There was a sudden stillness in the saloon, all eyes turned to the poker table. Baldy was grinning, his eyes like slits. He said, "I'm a law-abidin' citizen, and I like everybody to see that I'm justified before I kill a man. Repeat your charge, stranger, so's all can hear."

"You're a lying, cheatin' polecat," Morgan said loudly. "That clear enough?"

Baldy kicked his chair backwards, shot to his feet and plunged a hand to his forty-four. Almost curiously, Johnny watched the fat hand swing forward and close on the butt. Then he drew his twin Colts, smashed a bullet into Baldy's chest with his left gun and put out one of the saloon lights with his right.

The two shots crashed in a single report, and all hell broke. Johnny pushed the poker table aside, upsetting the lanky puncher, who was clawing at his gun. Then the Texan shot out the second lamp and backed toward the saloon stairs. Men yelled

and swore in the darkness, and guns flashed. Morgan reached the stairs.

THE TEXAN was no fool. He knew that, in the darkness, these unfriendly citizens of Sweetwater would crowd about the door and windows to block his exit. That was why he'd made for the stairs. Now he climbed them swiftly, out of the chorus of shouts and the groping hands, running up to the balcony and feeling for the knob of a door. The first one was locked. He groped along to the next. He turned it and the door opened, just as somebody got a lamp lit downstairs.

Now he was in a room where the darkness was broken by a window flooded with moonlight. He crossed swiftly. From a nearby bed, a woman screamed. He reached the window, smashed it with several blows from a Colt, and got through on to the wooden landing outside. He raced along the landing to wooden steps at one end.

A moment later Johnny Morgan was on the ground. As he ran along in the shadows, somebody fired a shot from the broken window above. The bullet splintered a log wall in the alley, and Johnny swung round a corner and headed for the street.

His guns were holstered now, and he ran freely. He reached the street in time to find men pouring out of the saloon. In the shadow of a boardwalk he ran swiftly away, headed for the town corral, but his clacking heels were heard. Somebody yelled, and bullets crashed into walls and posts around his loping figure.

He rounded a corner and was out of range. He sprinted for the corral. Hurriedly he found his big black mare and heaved the fancy Mexican saddle to her back. Working furiously, he buckled the cinch. He found his bridle and was working it on the black head when the saloon mob came lumbering and yelling. They were firing wildly in the air, most of them drunk, and all of them after his blood.

They came to the corral and crowded the entrance. Johnny swung to the saddle and heeled the mare from the shadows. There was a yell from the mob.

"There he is...git the killin' coyote!"

But already Johnny Morgan was riding his mount at the far fence of the corral, a high rail that stood in clear moonlight with the open country beyond. As bullets gouged saddle-leather and burned Johnny's hat, the mare leaped.

She went high and forward, and for a long moment she seemed to float uncertainly above the rail. Then she pitched down, forelegs stretched to take the strain, and Johnny huddled her mighty neck as she plunged and skidded, recovered, then moved away at a gallop.

The shooting stopped, but the citizens of Sweetwater weren't through yet. Morgan remembered their words, "the killin' coyote," and knew that Baldy must have died. He expected pursuit. After five minutes of riding, he reined back for a moment to listen. The rumble of galloping hoofs was plain enough, close up behind.

"What the heck," he laughed recklessly. "It's a right nice evenin' for a ride, anyway."

HE HEADED the mare west, across rolling sageland that lay like an ocean of silver in the moonlight. He was a long way from his native Texas, and the country was strange to him; but he figured that if he kept to the open moonlight, he couldn't run into trouble. His horse was strong with an easy, long-stepping pace which few could match. Johnny Morgan wasn't worried. To him, this was just another incident in a lively career.

He rode for an hour, then stopped to listen again. The mob still followed, but they were further away. Now he found himself in country which was broken with boulders and rocky ridges, and he figured that here was a good place to throw off the posse. The moon

was low in the sky now, and he wasn't keen to race his mount over unfamiliar territory in the dark.

He stepped her among the boulders. Soon he came to where a rocky peak lifted high, one side shining in the moonlight, the other in black shadow. Johnny reined back in the shadow, slid from the saddle, and trailed the reins forward to keep the mare from wandering. He explored the walls of the peak and, when his eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, found that it wouldn't be too difficult to climb.

The peak was sixty feet high. Morgan worked his way up, groping for footholds. He got to the top and lay flat, pleased with the fine view of the surrounding country. Away to the west there was a wide, grass-covered slope, silvery in the late moonlight. Far across the slope, high up and many miles away, there was a pinpoint of fire.

*A camp fire,* Johnny thought, or maybe a branding fire. That sure looked like good grazing range, and there were bound to be ranches. His thoughts were broken by the close thunder of hoofs, and he looked east to see a group of horsemen climbing a short ridge two hundred yards away.

They loped along the top of the ridge toward Johnny's peak. He wasn't worried. Even if they stumbled on the mare in the dark, he was in no danger. From his high peak he could hold off an army. He watched them ride in among the boulders, then pause uncertainly; and by now they were close enough to let him hear their growling argument.

"No use, I tell yuh. Never find him 'mongst this broken stuff."

"Likely he swung off to the north back aways," another voice said. "To Red Canyon, I mean. That's where I'd go, supposin' I was on the run."

"He's a stranger, ain't he? He wouldn't know 'bout the canyon. Let's keep on, I say."

"No." It was the first voice again, full of authority. "Reckon we won't waste our time. Could be holed up here in these danged rocks and we'd never find him. Let's go back."

THERE WERE about fifteen riders, as far as Morgan could see. They swung their mounts and started back east, riding unhurriedly. He watched them out of sight. He thought: *But that's not the end of it. I'm a marked man in this country from now on, and the sooner I get to hell out, the safer I'll be.*

It was a pity, he thought. Sweetwater had promised to be a danged interesting town, and he would have liked to stay awhile. During his short stay he had felt like a freak on display, everybody watching him and unwilling to talk about anything except where was he from and how long did he figure to stay. They'd never talked about themselves or Sweetwater. Johnny Morgan was odd man out, and the hostility was plain.

He figured that there could be only one reason for that. When a footloose, wandering cowboy was unwelcome in a cowtown, it could only mean that something was going on. Something the citizens wanted to keep to themselves. And the citizens of Sweetwater were a tough bunch. Johnny would dearly have liked to stay awhile, to satisfy his curiosity.

But now, thinking it out on his rocky peak, he decided to push west at dawn. Gal, the black mare, had had two days of good rest and feed, and would be good for a long day's journey. By sundown, Sweetwater and its mysteries would be a memory.

Morgan made ready to climb back down the peak—then the far glitter of fire again caught his eye. Only, now it was no mere pinpoint. No longer could he shrug it off as a camp or branding fire. There were high flames, and a bright glare that showed smoke belching skywards. Johnny looked at it for a long time, during which the fury of the fire died a little. It would be about four miles off, he figured.

A building of some kind, he thought. A ranch-house, maybe. It could happen so easily. A spark from a stove, an upset lantern. He shrugged, and climbed down the rock.

He stripped the saddle from Gal, slapped her away to graze, and settled the saddle to use as a pillow. Then he heard the clatter of walking hoofs. He tensed in the dark.

A horse was approaching from the west, clattering over a rocky ridge. Soon Morgan saw it outlined against the sky. A wide-hatted figure sat the saddle. Morgan saw the hat turn, and knew that the rider had seen Gal grazing in the moonlight.

He watched the man jog his mount down the slope to the grass and approach the mare. Johnny remained motionless. There was a glint of moonlight, and he knew that the newcomer had drawn a gun. He saw him lean from the saddle to look curiously at Gal.

Morgan watched. He didn't blame the stranger for being wary, but he had no way of knowing what kind of a hombre he was. A friendly call might bring a bullet in reply. He saw the man slide from the saddle, circling Gal and glancing this way and that. Johnny was in deep shadow, and remained unseen.

Then he saw the stranger walk close to Gal, and there was a forward movement of his gun arm. In a split-second flash of horror, Johnny Morgan saw the glinting six-gun held at the mare's head.

"No!" Johnny yelled, leaping out from the shadows. Swiftly the stranger swung his gun. But Morgan was dropping flat as the shot crashed, and his own Colts were out before he hit the ground.

THE TWIN guns spoke together. But their shots were high, purposely, because Morgan wouldn't risk hitting the mare. She bucked away in fright, and the stranger lowered his gun to shoot at Johnny on the ground.

A bullet bit hard at the dirt near the Texan's face. He fired one Colt and saw the man stagger back. The gun fell from his hand. He swayed across to his waiting horse and scrambled aboard. Cold fury was in Johnny Morgan, and he threw another shot before he realized what he was doing. He'd never shot at an unarmed man before—but then, he'd never before met up with a man who would shoot a horse in cold blood.

He knew that his second shot had found a mark, but, apparently, it had no more effect than the first. The stranger heeled his mount hard up the slope of a ridge and disappeared in the maze of faded moonlight and shadow.

Johnny holstered his guns and went to the trembling mare. Under his soothing hands she calmed. He said, "Gal, some mean coyote was gonna kill you. I don't know who he was, an' he didn't even know whose hoss you are. I don't savvy that. But one thing I can tell you. This is a danged ornery country, and the sooner we go the better it'll be for both of us."

Back on his bunk, he found it hard to sleep. There were too many puzzles bothering him. What kind of shady game were the tough citizens of Sweetwater playing? Why would a lone rider in the night try to shoot an innocent horse? He rolled a quirly and smoked it, thinking. Also, he had his own personal problems to think about.

His money was running low. He'd wandered a long way from his last punching job, and it was time for him to take another. He'd hoped to learn the layout while at Sweetwater, and maybe ask a neighboring rancher for a job. But that was out now. He would have to push west across the border into Idaho before it would be safe to stop. Two days' ride, he figured. One day would take him far enough to be reasonably safe from the men of Sweetwater, but he'd need to be across the border before he could risk settling down to a job.

He made his plans and dozed off. It

was sun-up when he woke, and he swore. He'd wanted to get an early start. He wanted to go a long way today. He ate dry biscuit and drank from a stream, and pulled out. If he'd only known it, he wasn't destined to get far at all.

## - 2 -

JOHNNY MORGAN rode his big black to the top of a rise and saw a smouldering heap of ashes ahead. He reined back, swiftly scanning the scene. He remembered last night's fire, and saw now that it hadn't been a burning ranch-house. But it was an out-building of a ranch, probably a storehouse. The homestead was farther west, a rambling log building in the shade of pine trees, with well-kept corrals at one side.

The sudden appearance of the buildings was a surprise, for Johnny had seen no grazing cattle. He was wary of approaching nearer. Everybody around here seemed so danged unfriendly, it would be a risk meeting them.

Luckily, there was no sign of human life. A few horses were in the corrals and a wisp of smoke curled from the ranch-house chimney, that was all. No one had seen him. He decided not to stretch his luck, and backed Gal away down the rise. Then he made a circle to the south, skirting the buildings and keeping well out of sight of open windows and doors.

Once away from the homestead, he prodded the mare to her former, long-stepping pace. Today he wanted to put a lot of miles behind. He rode for more than an hour, over billowing grassland that looked like fine range, but never once did he see grazing cattle. A ranch without cattle. It was just another peculiarity of this ornery Sweetwater country, it seemed.

He came to a heavily-timbered ridge and decided to circle it, figuring he could get to the other side quicker than by threading through the trees.

He turned his mount and headed along the base of the ridge. There was a sharp, air-splitting crack, and a bullet whined close overhead. Morgan's reaction was automatic. Before the rattling echoes had died, he was hunched low in the saddle and swinging away from the ridge in a reckless, zigzagging pattern.

More shots cracked, bullets hitting the dust at Gal's flying feet. A Winchester repeater, Johnny figured. He twisted to look back, and saw a puff of white smoke rise from the timbered ridge.

That was a good shot, the slug burning Morgan's hair as it passed through his hat. Johnny swayed the mare in another series of curves and reached the shelter of a coulee. There he hauled back, leaped from the saddle, and fell flat to peer over the rim of the coulee.

The rifle-smoke still hovered thinly above the timbered ridge. Morgan thought: *What I wouldn't give for a rifle right now.*

But he had no rifle, and could only lie there and fume. The ridge was far beyond Colt range. He watched, and long minutes later he saw a tell-tale cloud of dust billowing behind the trees. The cloud moved swiftly to the north and vanished beyond the ridge. The rifleman had ridden away.

JOHNNY planned his next move. He didn't understand what was going on around here, but his desire to get the hell out was as strong as ever. To the northwest, the country was lower, with a curving line of boxwoods and brush that indicated a river. It was close to noon now, the sun beating down, and he decided to head for the water.

The river came from a hazy line of mountains in the north. The water was

fast running and cool. Johnny dismounted and the mare plodded to the water to drink her fill. Morgan took a canteen from his saddlepack, filled it, then lay flat to drink from the running stream. He was enjoying himself when the sharp and angry voice cut in.

"All right...I've got you covered! On your feet and up with your hands."

For two reasons, Johnny Morgan finished his drink leisurely before even looking around. One was that he was truly thirsty, the other was that he wasn't used to obeying women whether they had him covered or not.

But when he did look at last, he was sorry he hadn't looked earlier. She was young and slim, with a lot of blonde hair spilling from under her sombrero. Eyes about as blue as eves could be. And a bronzed little hand that held a man-size forty-five unwaveringly.

"Hi," Johnny said, smiling and getting to his feet. He nodded at the forty-five. "Be careful with that thing, lady. I'm kinda superstitious, 'bout having guns pointed at me."

"Get out," the girl said angrily. "Get on your hoss an' hit the breeze, or I'll shoot."

"But we ain't even been introduced," Johnny protested.

"I'll introduce you to a bullet, if you don't get off this range and stay off! And you can tell Ross Halley that the same goes for him, too."

"Wal, now," Johnny said, "I'd be right happy to take your message, if only I knew where to find this Halley gent. But you've gotta excuse my ignorance—I'm a stranger around here."

"I don't wanta stand here arguing with you," the girl fumed. "Get off this range, pronto."

"Now wait a minute," Johnny said, taking a step toward her. "I'd kinda like to know..."

The gun bucked in her hand, crashing a shot that fanned Morgan's neck. In the tiny moment of wide-eyed reaction after pulling the trigger, the girl sprawled to the ground under the Texan's headlong dive.

THE STRUGGLE was brief, and Johnny got to his feet with her gun in his hand. He tried to help the girl up, but she shook him off furiously. In a moment she was standing, dusting her riding-skirt and flashing angry eyes at him.

"All right," she gasped. "Now you're calling the play. What're you figuring to do? Burn me at a tree and shoot my hoss back there in the boxwoods?"

"Be quiet!" Johnny frowned. "Seems to me you've been doin' a lotta talkin' but tellin' me nothing. I'm plumb sorry I had to tumble you in the dirt—but now I'd sure like some explanations. My name's Johnny Morgan, and I'm from Texas. Since driftin' into Sweetwater I've been cheated, shot at, bushwhacked, and somebody tried to shoot my hoss. What's it all 'bout, anyway?"

Her fury had died as he spoke. Now she was looking at him keenly, and the light in her eyes might have been hope.

"Oh..." she said at last. "You *are* a stranger! I'm sorry.. I naturally figured that you were one o' Halley's men. They burned one of our sheds last night, and shot some hosses. They..."

"Lady," Johnny said, kindly now, "if you're in trouble here, I'd sure like to know all 'bout it. How 'bout tellin' me the whole story?"

The girl shrugged. She walked to a log by the river and sat down wearily. She said, "It's the old story of a bad man's greed. Ross Halley owns all the ranch outfits from Sweetwater to the Blackbutte Mountains—all except ours, the Lazy J. My father, Bob Jensen, has refused all of Halley's ridiculous offers. That's how Halley got most of his properties—by offering cheap prices and then making things tough for the ranchers until they accepted."

"An old story, like you say," John-

ny said. "But your father's got guts, huh? Refuses to be scared off?"

"Yeh. Not that it'll do us much good. We can't hold out forever. They rustle our beef, shoot our hosses an' burn our buildings. And we can't fight 'em with our few hands."

"This Halley gang is kinda powerful, I take it?" Johnny asked.

"Gang?" the girl said. "Mister, it's an army. The toughest an' biggest mob o' gunmen in the West. He pays 'em well an' they do whatever he says. They've just 'bout taken over Sweetwater. All the decent citizens left long ago."

"That so?" Morgan looked thoughtful. He said, "You ever heard o' the Law? You ever heard tell o' marshals, an' so on?"

"Sure." Her smile was bitter. "We've got a marshal, mister. Ross Halley put him in office, an' of all the crooks in Sweetwater, Marshal Vanny is the crookedest."

"I see." Johnny did some more thinking, drank in the fair beauty of this Jensen girl, and came to a decision. He said, "How many hands you got ridin' for the Lazy J?"

"We had eight in the good days. But some of 'em quit when the pressure was on. We have four now, apart from Dad."

"Make it five," Johnny grinned. "I was lookin' for a job and this is it."

THE GIRL looked him over, taking in his lean, trim build, his softly smiling eyes, the twin Colts that rode low at his thighs. She was about to say something when there was a clatter of hoofs, and Johnny turned to see a man on a big black horse ride from the bordering boxwoods. The newcomer slid his mount to a halt, flashed a look at the gun in Morgan's hand, and plunged for his own forty-five.

"Kale, no! It's all right!" the girl screamed. And, taking in the situation in a flash, Johnny dropped the girl's gun and threw up his hands. The quick action was just in time to stop the newcomer's pressure on the trigger of the forty-five aimed at Morgan.

"That was kinda close," Johnny grinned. "I'm Johnny Morgan, and your name's Kale, I take it. Pleased to meet you."

"This is Dad's foreman, Kale Adams," the girl said. And to Kale, "Mister Morgan wants to ride for us. He's from Texas."

"I see." The foreman's gaze was steely and unsmiling, but he holstered his gun. He said, "Figured you was an enemy, standin' there with Miss Joan's gun in your hand."

"He took it off me," the girl said, coloring. "I nearly shot him, thinking he was a Halley man."

"A kinda natural mistake, the way things are," Johnny said. "Kale Adams, I hear tell you need riders. I'm lookin' for a job."

The foreman looked from Morgan to the girl and back again. He shrugged and said, "Know what yo're gettin' into?"

"Sure. Miss Jensen explained the set-up. Kinda interestin', I reckon. You taking me on?"

"The pay's low and not exactly regular," Adams said. "Bob Jensen's havin' a rough spin. You could get three times the money workin' for Ross Halley. You better think it over, Morgan."

"Don't need to," Johnny grinned. "I'm a right peculiar hombre. Don't care much 'bout money at all."

"Let's go back to the house," the girl said. "I'll get my hoss."

She went in among the boxwoods and returned mounted on a likely looking pinto. She sat him as gracefully as Johnny would have guessed. She was a right purty gal, he thought.

The three rode northeast at an easy pace, Johnny telling them of his adventures in and around Sweetwater. He said, "Guess my ol' Gal was mistook for the hoss o' yours, Adams. In the moonlight, I mean. They're both big and black."

"Could be," Adams said. "Shootin'

"We've lost men from ambush right on the ranch itself."

the hosses o' the Lazy J is part o' their game. Hampers our movements."

"And again this mornin' when somebody tried to bushwhack me," Morgan said, "they mistook Gal for your hoss an' thought they was shootin' at you."

"Likely," Kale said. He was a taciturn man of few words. His eyes were cold gray, the eyes of a man burdened with too much worry. Johnny Morgan liked to smile a lot and talk a lot, and it was strange that he should find himself liking this man who did neither.

It was plain that Joan liked him, too. She looked at him with fond, anxious eyes, and said, "Kale, you'll have to be careful. Mebbe they figure that with you out o' the way, Dad'll have to give in. I think you oughta carry a rifle in the future."

"Reckon I'd better," the foreman said.

THEY RODE across rich rangeland where the grasses waved in the breeze, and Johnny could see why the unscrupulous Halley was so anxious to add the Lazy J to his chain of ranches. Then he remembered something.

"Ain't seen any beef around," he said, looking at Adams. "You got the herd rounded up, or something?"

"Yeh. We were losin' too many steers. Now we've got 'em in a big coulee north o' here, with the boys ridin' guard."

The girl was about to add something —but the sound of far-off gunfire brought the three riders to a halt. They looked northward, where the echoing reports sounded.

"Raid on the herd, likely," Adams growled. And without another word he heeled his mount hard to the north. Joan Jensen did likewise.

A moment later Johnny Morgan was after them. Heeling the big mare for speed, he slowly overtook them. When he drew level, Adams and the girl were arguing.

"I won't have you takin' these chances," the foreman panted. "Go to the house, Joan!"

"Be quiet!" the girl snapped, but with a fondness in her eyes as she looked across from her heaving pinto. "I'm not one o' your cowhands, Kale Adams. You can't order me around."

"If anythin' happened to you, it'd kill your father," Adams said.

"I can look after myself. I'm not running away to safety while you an' Dad an' the boys fight for the Lazy J."

More than ever Johnny Morgan admired her. He saw her ease, her big forty-five in its holster, and he knew that she would use it. She hadn't hesitated to use it against him. She was a poor shot, but she had a ton of courage.

More gunfire sounded above the thundering hoofs of the horses, and Johnny figured that the coulee must be close by. It was. He looked ahead, and saw four riders hurtle up over a rise of land and pound away to the east. They fired back over the rim as they rode. In a flash Kale Adams' gun was out, and Morgan knew that the riders must be the enemy. Their course took them to within forty yards of the foreman's party, and Adams threw angry shots as they passed.

Now for the first time the riders realized the new menace, and they threw lead in reply. Morgan heard Joan's gun thunder beside him.

Lead whined about Johnny and his two new friends, and the Texan went into flashing action. Letting go the reins, he drew both Colts and fired a shot from each. They made one thunderous report in the chorus of gunfire. The raiders were already past and headed away, but one man fell from the saddle to hurtle along the ground and pitch in a heap, while another dropped his gun and clapped a hand to his shoulder.

BY THE TIME Adams, Joan and the Texan had hauled to a stop, the raiders had vanished among the grassy ridges and hollows. The Lazy J foreman holstered his gun, cantered his mount back to the still figure that

lay face downward in the grass, and slid from his saddle to make a quick examination.

Joan Jensen holstered her forty-five with a shrug. She said, "I missed. I'm always too afraid of hitting their hosses. I'd sure hate to kill a hoss."

Four riders appeared over the rim of the coulee, and Joan hailed them with relief as they loped forward. Then Kale Adams came back from the fallen raiders and said, "It's Jim Steele, as dead as a doornail. That was right pretty shootin', Morgan."

Now the four Lazy J hands had come close, and the foreman said to a red-headed puncher, "You boys all right? Any damage?"

"Four steers dead," the puncher replied, looking curiously at Johnny Morgan. "They kinda caught us sudden like, up over the east rim, shootin' promiscuous. A hit-and-run raid. Cash got his arm creased."

"Shucks, it ain't nothin'," a thin, wizened man said, trying to hide his bleeding arm. "I'll wind my neck'chief round it..."

"You'll come to the house and I'll doctor it," Joan broke in.

"That's right," Adams agreed. Then he said, "Red, we've got a new hand. Meet Johnny Morgan, from Texas. Morgan, this's Red Nolan."

"Howdy," Johnny said.

Red Nolan grinned. He said, "You must be crazy, Morgan, joinin' up with us—but me, I like crazy hombres. Howdy."

"And this's Cash Tyler," the foreman said, introducing the others, "and these fellas are Jake an' Happy Durl."

After the friendly nods, Adams was suddenly brusque and cold-eyed again. He said, "All right... Red, Happy, Jake, get back to the herd. Cash, you come with us. Let's go."

"What 'bout that dead body clutterin' up our range?" Red nodded casually at the figure of Steele.

"His hoss is around somewhere," Adams said. "You know what to do, Red."

He led the way off again, and Joan, the Texan, and the wounded Cash followed. They rode across open range toward distant ranch buildings, which Johnny had circled earlier. Johnny was asking himself questions without knowing the answers. A few hours ago he'd been kind of keen to shake the dust of Wyoming from Gal's feet. Now he was committed to staying, and liking the prospect. Why?

He looked sideways at Joan Jensen, but shook his head. She could hardly be the reason. He'd seen a lot of danged purty girls in five States, but they hadn't corraled him. No sir!

## - 3 -

BOB JENSEN was a white-haired man of fifty, his face the color of old leather, his body thick and strong. He had a determined chin and there was a tired smile in his eyes, and Johnny Morgan liked him. Here was a fighter if ever there was one, and the Texan liked a true fighter. The cattleman looked him in the eyes and put the position clearly.

"I don't know how long your job'll last, Morgan, or how often I'll be able to pay you. The way things are, I can't hold out much longer. But I ain't cryin' quits while I've got an ounce o' strength to fight with, an' I'm sure glad to have you. But any time you wanta pull out..." he shrugged.

There was a good meal, prepared by Jensen's Chinese cook, one Sam Ling. Joan said to Johnny, "Sam's been with Dad since before I was born. Simply refuses to leave—which is a good thing. If he walked out and went after a job where they paid, likely I'd be expected to do the cooking around here. Can you tell me why a girl is supposed to do all the indoor slavery while men

enjoy the open air life, Johnny Morgan?"

Johnny grinned. He said, "There, now, I'll bet you're a danged good cook, Miss Joan."

"You're wrong," she said pleasantly. "I couldn't cook a thing. And I've got no hankering to learn. I'm probably the dangest gal you ever saw."

"Prob'ly," Johnny said, and his eyes flashed a smile for her alone. He saw her flush a little and try to cover it by a quick change of subject, her talk nimble and bright.

If it came to that, he thought, she was about the dangest girl he'd ever known. To look at her now, chattering away at the dinner table, you wouldn't have guessed that she had a worry in the world. She could throw a gun and take her place with men among whining lead, or look at a dead man without a sign of the horror that women usually displayed. Yet she wasn't hard. He had watched as she bathed and bandaged old Cash Tyler's arm, all soft and gentle and womanly.

Johnny Morgan started work that night. With Kale Adams and Cash Tyler, he rode out to the coulee to relieve Red Nolan and the Durl brothers. It was moonlight again, the herd a lazy dark mass scattered across the basin.

After Red and the Durls had gone, Adams said, "We'll spread around. Cash, you take the east rim. I'll watch the north side. Johnny, you take the river side..." He pointed to the southwest, the lowest side of the coulee, beyond which a far ribbon of silver curved in the night. He said, "First sign o' trouble, you fire a shot an' holler. We'll come runnin'."

THE COULEE was maybe half a mile across. Johnny took the long way round the rim. He eased the Colts in their holsters, and scanned the silver-bathed countryside for sign of movement.

There were trees and some sagebrush along the river, and he figured that if trouble came it might well come from there. The open range afforded no cover in the moonlight.

He got to thinking of how he'd meant to be a long way further west by now, and wondered again why he felt so good about having this new job. It was one hell of a job, likely to pay off in hot lead, and unlike any he'd had in a wildly adventurous career.

Johnny Morgan had ridden long and winding trails, and little incidents like the poker-game-shooting at Sweetwater had been plentiful enough. But this was different. He'd always been able to quit a place when it became too hot for him. Now he had chosen to stay where it was very hot indeed.

The night was long and lonely, and sometimes he almost wished for action to break the monotony. He was an old hand at riding herd, used to long night watches, but tonight there was a kind of tension in the air, seeming to drag out each minute to an hour. Now he could understand those Durando bandits and how they all hated night sentry-work.

He grinned at the memory. Just another exciting incident in the wanderer's career. That was the lure of wandering, he thought. You never knew where the far trails were going to take you, never knew how or where each day would end. He'd started out to wander down the Blue Smoke River from Montana to northern Wyoming—and twenty-four hours later he was lying wounded, in the high Black Hills hide-out of Durando the outlaw.

And he'd lived with the bandits for five weeks, during which he had discovered that Lou Durando was a happy-hearted adventurer much the same as himself. Except for a difference of opinion regarding the property rights of other people, they might have been brothers.

Not that he had any illusions about Durando. The Mexican had a price on his head, was wanted in three States for stage-robberies, train-robbery, and bank hold-ups. Probably he had killed. But when a lone puncher finds him-

self a guest in such a man's nest, he doesn't object to his host's faults. Johnny Morgan had found the outlaw likeable and a friend, and had been willing to leave it at that.

Strange how his thoughts had drifted back. The whole incident, and the exciting day that had led to it, had happened more than a year ago. Why had he thought of it now? Oh, sure the loneliness of this night watch, that was it. He recalled it now, the way the monotony had reminded him of Durando's men and their distaste of night sentry-work.

He scanned the far-off trees again, but saw no movement. He took a pinch of Durham from his sack and began to roll a smoke between slim fingers—away to his left there was a shot, and a high-toned yell.

JOHNNY dropped the makings and was heeling his horse before the yell finished. The rumpus had come from Cash Tyler's section on the east rim of the coulee. Two more shots sounded, two different cracks which told of two-way shooting. Morgan was riding hard, taking the long way round the rim while the steers stirred and milled uneasily in the basin.

There was one more shot, then Johnny saw two horsemen in the moonlight. The Texan's right Colt was out, but he held his fire, unable to tell friend from foe.

He slid Gal to a dusty stop and heard Kale Adams say, "That you, Johnny? Hold your fire. He's high-tailed it."

"Who?" Morgan pranced his mount close to Adams, and saw that the other horseman, slumped a little in the saddle now, was old Cash Tyler. He said, "What happened?"

"Another hit-run raid," the foreman growled. "One man. We'd never catch him at night 'mong them ridges. Anyway, Cash's hit."

The foreman swung from his saddle and went to Tyler. Johnny did likewise. Together they helped the puncher from his mount and eased him to the ground.

"Just a scratch," Cash mumbled. "Ain't nothin'. I'll kinda plug it up with a neck'chief..."

"Like hell," Adams said. "You got it bad, through the shoulder. We'll take you back to the house..."

A sudden volley of shots and a chorus of yells split the night, away on the river side of the coulee. Johnny started upright, and the foreman swore.

"Blast me for a fool! They tricked us...got us round to this side so's they could play hell on the other. Let's go..."

But he hesitated, looking down at the bleeding Tyler. Across the coulee, gunshots and yells were joined by rumbling calls of cattle, and Morgan could see the gunflashes and the swirling movement of frightened steers.

"Go..." Cash Tyler gasped. "Leave me, Kale. I'm all right."

"But..." The foreman still hesitated.

"Go, blast you!" the puncher spat. "I'll still be here...when you git back..."

"Come on, Johnny," Adams said.

Johnny needed no second invitation. He leaped to the saddle and heeled away at the foreman's side. The two big blacks were evenly matched, pacing it out step for step. Adams yelled, "It's a stampede. They'll spill 'em out over the rims an' they'll scatter along the river. Take us days to round 'em up..."

The two riders burned distance around the coulee. By the time they reached Morgan's former section, steers were thundering frantically over the rim and scattering toward the river. The raiders were spread out in a wide line, moving away from the coulee now, still firing skywards and yelling shrilly. There were about five of them, Johnny thought, counting the gunflashes.

NOW THE Lazy J foreman was hauling back on the reins and shooting at the raiders. It added to the

general uproar, but it didn't matter any more. The herd was now moving solidly, and nothing would stop them. Johnny spread a little apart from his boss and joined in the shooting.

In all that muddle of noise and dust and movement, accurate shooting wasn't easy. The Texan emptied one gun, and by that time the riders had stopped firing and were heeling away to the north. Their job was done. Those thundering steers weren't going to stop until they'd run themselves tired. Kale Adams cursed loudly above the rumble of hoofs, holstering his gun and spreading his hands helplessly.

"I'm goin' after 'em," Morgan yelled, his horse prancing excitedly.

"No good!" Adams cried. "Let 'em go."

"Like hell," the Texan yelled. "Mebbe I'll get one of 'em before they lose 'emselves in the ridges."

"Johnny, don't be a danged fool...."

But Johnny Morgan was already prodding his mount, heading after the raiders who had now drawn together and were high-tailing it northward. In the moonlight he saw their dust, billowing like a white mist. Gal settled down into her long-striding speed and the ground flew past underfoot. Then the raiders realized that they were being chased, and started shooting.

The lead whined wide of Johnny. It wasn't easy to shoot back over the shoulder on a fast-moving horse. But for Morgan, shooting straight ahead and steadily lessening the distance, it was a different proposition. He saw a rider fall, the horse wheeling away to slow down, while the four remaining riders thundered on.

They went over a moonlit rise of ground and dipped among the first of the shadowy ridges. Morgan knew better than to follow. He hauled back on the reins and looked at the fallen rider. There was a flashing report and a hot slug screamed through Johnny's upper left arm.

Gal bucked away from the shot which exploded almost in her face, and that saved Johnny Morgan's life. While she pranced, more lead snarled close to the Texan's head and body. With his right hand he emptied a Colt into the shooting figure on the ground, and it lay still.

Johnny's arm was throbbing. He could feel the warm stickiness of blood oozing down his sleeve. *Serves me right,* he thought. *When'll I learn that an hombre who falls an' lies still ain't necessarily dead!*

HE TOOK off his neckerchief and bound the wound as best he could. Then he headed back for the coulee, letting Gal make her own pace. He felt a little sick. He took a canteen from his pack and sipped cool water, and felt better.

When he reached the coulee there wasn't a steer in sight. Dust still hung thickly in the air. He reined back for a moment to listen to the far-off drumming of hoofs, then rode down the slope and across the basin to the opposite rim.

There he found Kale Adams attending to Tyler. The old puncher peered at Johnny in the moonlight. "You went after 'em, huh? Fool thing to do. How'd you make out?"

"Got one of 'em," Morgan said.

"You did?" Adams lifted his face to smile, the first suggestion of humor Johnny had ever seen on his face. But the smile vanished in a moment. Then he said, "Wal, that's one less we've gotta fight, but you sure did a fool thing. You might've run plumb into an ambush an' stopped a bullet."

"Yeh," Johnny agreed, "I plumb might've."

The foreman was lighting matches to look closely at Tyler's wound. Then he stood up, and mopped sweat from his face. He said, "That's gotta come out, and pronto. Think you can stand a ride back to the house, Cash?"

"With this danged scratch?" Cash growled. "It's a cinch."

But it was no cinch. The wizened

"One of the small ranchers disappeared completely..."

little puncher couldn't help groaning with pain as Morgan and the foreman helped him back to the saddle, and his injured shoulder bled afresh, despite the way Adams had plugged and bound it.

Adams said, "Johnny, we'll ride one each side o' him. No point in stayin' out here, anyway. There's no herd to watch over."

They started slowly back to the house. The foreman said, "It's gonna take us days to round up them steers. And we won't get 'em all. Some'll be running-ironed an' put 'mong other herds. Seems to me, Bob Jensen's playin' a losing game."

"What 'bout this Ross Halley, who's behind it all?" Morgan asked. "Can't we get at him? Where's he hang out? Ain't much use to keep killin' his hired hands—seems like there's always plenty more where they came from."

"Halley lives at the big Square W outfit six miles to the north," Adams said. "It'd take more men than we've got to get at him. He keeps a special ridin' crew there, tough hombres who'll shoot at sight."

"Tell me more," Johnny suggested. "I'm kinda curious 'bout this Halley."

"Wal...he's the biggest cattleman in Wyoming," Adams said. "An' the most unscrupulous. His other ranches are run by foremen an' crews who're honest enough, but he keeps that special team o' gunmen as a bodyguard at the Square W."

"How many of 'em are there?" Morgan asked.

"A dozen, mebbe."

"And they take care o' all the skullduggery?"

"No. There's another team o' hooligans quartered at Sweetwater. They run the town. Marshal Seth Vanny's the ringleader. There're few decent citizens left. Only one, mebbe."

"Who?" the Texan wanted to know.

"Robinson, the bank manager. He's forced to handle Halley's banking, or Halley'd have him shifted. But he don't like doin' it."

"I see." Johnny Morgan chewed it over, the basis of a startling plan stirring in his brain. He said, softly, "How many o' Halley's gunslingers live in Sweetwater?"

Kale Adams was peering at him in the moonlight. He said, "You're sure a curious hombre, Johnny. There's 'bout twenty-thirty, I'd say. Why?"

"Then you'd reckon that Halley was employin' mebbe thirty to forty men?"

"Near as I can figure. A few more, mebbe."

Johnny grinned. He said, "Thanks for the information, Kale. Now I've got a proper picture of the set-up."

"So what? How does that help us?"

"Mebbe it doesn't." Morgan was still smiling, pleased and also a little startled at the fantastic idea that had occurred to him. He said, "Then again ...mebbe I'll be able to figure an answer to Ross Halley an' his private army. I sure hope I can. The Jensens are right nice folks, an' I'd hate to see 'em beaten."

## - 4 -

JOAN JENSEN left her bed at dawn to attend to Cash Tyler. Coolly and confidently she probed for the bullet, got it out, and cleaned the wound. She smiled back at his wizened but grateful grin, and said, "You ol' longhorn... I think you get yourself shot on purpose, just to have me fuss over you."

"Dang it!" the puncher chuckled. "You've done guessed it!"

Then Kale Adams noticed Johnny Morgan's red-stained sleeve, and said, "Looks like here's another you can fuss over, Joan. Dog-gone it, Johnny, I didn't know you'd been hit."

"Jus' a crease," Johnny said, but couldn't escape from Joan. As she doc-

tored him, she said, "See what you've got yourself into? You should've stayed in Texas. You'll get yourself killed, working for us."

"Mebbe not," Morgan said. He was still toying with his wonderful idea. He was turning it over in his mind, figuring times and distances and the odds. It was a desperate plan, but this was a desperate situation.

Adams sent him to bed until midday, during which time Red Nolan and the Durl brothers set out after the scattered herd. The foreman mapped out a route for them, arranging that he and Johnny Morgan would start a day later, take a different route, and join them at a certain point.

Johnny had other ideas. The desperate plan had taken hold of him solidly. If he joined the hands in the round-up, he would only be wasting valuable time, he figured. Better to leave them short-handed and play for the bigger stake of victory.

A LITTLE before sundown, Johnny was working in one of the corrals when he saw three horsemen approaching from the north. He called Kale Adams from the bunkhouse. The foreman squinted into the distance, and frowned.

"Ross Halley," he said, and swung away to the house.

Johnny stayed in the corral. He watched the three climb a long slope of range, riding at an easy pace, and when they came close it was no trouble to guess which was Halley. Then Morgan saw something else—a second group of horsemen who had appeared on a ridge half a mile further west, lined up against the sunset. He guessed that they were more of Halley's men, come to cover their boss against possible action from angry Lazy J hands.

Ross Halley was tall and straight in the saddle, his clothes expensive, his cream-colored hat wide and curly-brimmed. A Colt was holstered at his right hip, its butt jutting from under his coat. He was riding a golden palomino.

The men who rode at each of his elbows were unshaven and vicious-looking. Each packed two forty-fives. They glared at Morgan's cool stare as they passed, but Halley didn't glance at him. Johnny saw Bob Jensen and Adams come from the house, grim and frowning. Jensen carried a Sharps carbine, his finger on the trigger.

"You get to hell off my property, Halley," he growled, "and take your hired scum with you."

Halley drew rein and showed his teeth in a smile. When he spoke, his voice was deep and vibrant, like a man tremendously sure of himself.

"That any way to greet a visitor?" he said. "Put that gun away and quit playing the fool, Jensen. I've come to help you."

"I'll bet," Jensen spat.

"Sure, I want to help you. What're neighbors for, huh? I've heard that you're short-handed and your beef is scattered over half Wyoming. I've heard that you've lost a few horses and had one or two disastrous fires. Seems to me you're in need of help, Jensen."

"Not the kind I'd get from you, polecat," Jensen said.

The tall man leaned forward in the saddle, his smile gone. He said, "You're in no position to call me names, Jensen. You're on your last legs, and you know it. I'm here to make my last offer, and if you're not a complete fool you'll accept. I'll give you five thousand dollars for the Lazy J."

"I'll give you five minutes to get outa my sight," Jensen said.

"You're an obstinate fool, Jensen. I'll never make another offer, and you'll end up with nothing..."

"The boss gave you five minutes to get the hell out," Kale Adams drawled. "You'd plumb better start moving."

"I'm in no hurry," Halley said, smiling toward his distant line of riders. "And I wouldn't start anything if I

were you. The Lazy J is in bad enough with the law already. Jed Cramer was found on your range late yesterday, dead and roped to his horse. Marshal Vanny's investigating."

"He was plugged durin' a four-man raid on our herd," Adams said. "He was roped to his hoss at my orders."

"That so?" The frank admission startled Halley. "Why?"

"Figured it might act as a warnin' to others," Adams said. "And there's another dead man roamin' around tied to his hoss, also. Ain't they found him yet? He was killed in another raid yesterday. I got an idea that if enough dead men were sent off Lazy J range tied to their hosses, your hooligans might start wonderin' whether the game's worth the candle."

"I see." Now Halley's face was dark with anger. "I'll have to report all this to Vanny, of course. You've admitted to killing men, and I have witnesses to swear to what you said. Who was killed yesterday, anyway?"

"Hombre called Jim Steele, from Sweetwater."

"Jim Steele?" one of Halley's gunmen snarled. "Why, you dirty danged..."

"Hold it!" Johnny Morgan cut in, as the gunman plunged for his forty-five. The man's action froze, but he turned his head to watch Johnny stroll from the corral. The Texan hadn't drawn a gun, but there was something about his easy walk, his smiling insolence, that held the gunman's hand. But the hand still covered the butt of the holstered hogleg, and Morgan watched it.

"I could let you yank it out an' then beat you," he said softly. "If you don't believe it, try me."

"Who the hell are you?" Ross Halley demanded. "Who asked you to horn in?"

"Tell you in a while," Johnny said. Then to the gunman, "Drop that hand. I'm kinda superstitious 'bout hands on gunbutts."

THERE WAS a moment of silence, during which Johnny heard the tap of light heels come from the house a few steps, then pause. Joan Jensen. But he didn't look at her.

The gunman dropped his hand from the holster. Morgan said, "That's better. Now we can talk sociable like. All I wanta say is this, Ross Halley... while you're reportin' Steele's death to your tinhorn lawman, you can tell him I'm the hombre who actually killed Steele. An' last night, little way north o' the big coulee, I killed another."

"Brother, you're putting a noose round your neck," Halley said. "What name'll I say?"

"Johnny Morgan, of Texas. I killed a bald-headed cardsharp in Sweetwater —you can add that to your report."

"Dane Meyer!" one of the gunmen exclaimed. "This's the coyote what shot Dane Meyer. Hell..."

"Hold it," Johnny said, watching a claw-like hand. "I told Dane Meyer he didn't have a chance, an' now I'm tellin' you."

"A shot from you would bring my bodyguard down on you," Halley said. "They'd riddle you." He glanced at the riders on the ridge.

"But it wouldn't help *you* any," Kale Adams said. "You three would be dead. If you fancy yourselves against Morgan an' me, go for your guns."

Halley sneered, but didn't accept the invitation. He prodded his horse away, pausing only to spit words at Johnny Morgan.

"I'll remember you, Texan."

"Likely I'll remember you, too." Johnny grinned.

THE THREE men loped their mounts away, headed northward to the Square W. The riders along the ridge followed them at a distance. The Lazy J people watched them out of sight. Then Joan Jensen said her piece.

"Too bad, Johnny. You did your best to tease 'em into a fight, but they jus'

wouldn't. That was a swell chance to wipe Halley out of our hair, an' we'll never get another."

"Wouldn't have got us any place," Kale Adams said. "Like Halley said, his men would've riddled us."

"We could've stood 'em off with rifles from the house windows," Joan said, her blue eyes flashing. "We could've fought it out once an' for all. I'm sick of all this cat-and-mouse stuff..." Angrily she blinked back a tear and ran into the house. Her father shrugged, grinning at Morgan.

"The kid's just 'bout sick with worry. You wouldn't think so, most o' the time. But every once in a while her nerves snap. Wal, you can't blame her. The position's kinda hopeless—unless mebbe a miracle happens."

"You don't need a miracle," Johnny said quietly. "All you want is a way to smash Ross Halley."

"Ain't it the same?" the rancher growled.

"No, boss. I...I've been figurin' things, an' I've got a plan. Mebbe you'll reckon it's the wildest thing you ever heard, an' you'll be right. It's kinda fantastic. But it might work."

"I'm ready to try anythin'," Bob Jensen said. "You wanta talk 'bout it over chow? Sam Ling'll have it ready in half an hour."

"Fine," Johnny said.

AFTER CLEANING up in the bunkhouse, he joined the Jensens and Kale Adams at the evening meal. Joan was her bright self again. She had been told of Johnny's claim to have a plan, and was visibly excited.

"Wal, let's have it, Texan," she said, as soon as they were seated. "Don't keep us in suspense."

"All right," Morgan said. "But first I wanta know somethin'. That branch bank at Sweetwater, the one managed by a fella named Robinson. Would you say that it holds a lot o' dinero?"

"Wal, it's the only bank this side o' High City," Adams said. Then he frowned. "What's that got to do with fightin' Halley?"

"A danged lot," Johnny grinned. "But first tell me more. You say that Halley owns every ranch around—except the Lazy J. Wal, that means that most all o' the money in the Sweetwater bank would be Halley's. Right?"

"Wal...yes. Most of it. But if you're figurin' to break Halley by robbin' the bank, it wouldn't work. It's a branch bank and Robinson passes the deposits to his headquarters in the East. Anyway, when a bank is robbed, it makes the money good. The clients don't lose."

"Anyway," Joan said, her eyes wide. "Your life isn't worth a lead dime in Sweetwater, Johnny. You'd never get close enough to the bank to rob it..."

"Hey, hold your hosses," the Texan laughed. "I'm jus' an honest cowpoke, an' I don't rob banks. But I know somebody who does. And if I was to go tell him that the Sweetwater bank was loaded with dinero, he'd be mighty interested. An' if he kinda decided to visit Sweetwater, my conscience wouldn't be troubled. I don't want any part of any robbery."

"When're you going to quit talking in riddles and tell us your plan?" Joan demanded. "What's robbing the bank got to do with fighting Ross Halley?"

"It ain't so much Halley you've gotta fight. It's Halley's power—that private army he seems to have collected from all over the West. Smash that gang, an' what can Halley do?"

"Nothin'," Bob Jensen said. "Take away his hired help, an' he becomes a man dependin' on his forty-five like the rest of us. But what's robbin' the bank gotta do with it?"

Johnny Morgan smiled. "Wal... this friend o' mine, when he comes to Sweetwater he won't be exactly on his own. He'll bring his gang—the biggest mob o' toughs in the Black Hills. They've got almost a town o' their

own, them owlhoots, an' I know where it is. Spent a few weeks there once. I can tell you, Lou Durando bosses as many toughs as Halley, mebbe more. If the two gangs clashed at Sweetwater..." He grinned at the picture in his mind. Then he said, "An' I reckon I can fix it so's they'll clash."

KALE ADAMS was frowning, not impressed with the plan at all. He said, "I can't see Halley's gang fightin' to protect the bank."

"The bank's only a bait to lure Durando," Johnny said. "If he comes all the way from the Black Hills to Sweetwater, he'll do a danged proper job when he gets here. He'll hold up the whole town. An' Halley's men'll fight. And if he raids the Square W on the way back, Halley's men will fight to protect the ranch. I figure I can fix for that to be done."

"Don't see how," Adams said. "Why would Durando bother to raid a ranch so far from his hideout? Drivin' stolen beef all that way would slow him up too much."

"There're reasons why he'll do it if I ask him to," Johnny said quietly. "Like I said, he's my friend."

"I don't like it," Bob Jensen said. "I've heard tell o' this Durando. A bad hombre. Don't like the idea o' teamin' up with a danged outlaw."

"You don't have to team," Morgan argued. "All you an' the boys have to do is sit tight an' mind your own business. Durando's gang will be on a rampage, but the Lazy J won't have anythin' to do with it. An' when it's all over, Ross Halley'll be left lickin' his wounds. He'll be smashed, and won't bother you again. Mebbe he'll be killed."

Joan was smiling. She said, "You're a man after my own heart, Johnny Morgan. You call a spade a spade. Me, I hope Halley gets killed. It's what he deserves."

"You're plumb right," the Texan said. "Men have died already, an' this is a danged serious situation. We've gotta fight lawlessness with lawlessness. Or go under."

"All right," Bob Jensen said. His chin had firmed, and there was a new hope beginning to burn in his eyes. "All right, Johnny. If you think you can swing it, go ahead. An' if it works, I'll be indebted to you for the rest o' my life."

*Not for the rest o' your life,* Johnny thought. *I'll be claiming settlement o' the debt purty soon. Your greatest treasure....*

"How long'll it take you to reach the hide-out?" Adams asked.

"Four days, on Gal," the Texan said. "A day to put it to Durando, an' mebbe five days for the gang to reach Sweetwater. If you folks can hold out against Halley for another ten days, your troubles should be over."

"We'll hold out," Jensen said, reaching across the table to grip Morgan's hand. "Leave as soon as you like, Texan. And good luck."

Johnny figured to leave at dawn the next day. He aimed to get as far north as possible before nightfall, away from territory where every stranger would be an enemy. He knew that Marshal Vanny would be out to get him for the killing of Dane Meyer. To Adams, he said, "We've gotta keep our plan a secret, so's Durando'll catch Halley's men by surprise. But it'll be easy to account for my absence. If Vanny comes, you can tell him I was kinda scared o' being strung up, an' high-tailed it out o' here. Tell him I went north. He'll figure you're tryin' to put him off my trail, and go south, mebbe."

Next morning they helped him pack and saddle up, and wished him luck. Johnny watched for his chance to catch Joan alone, and said, "When you said I was a man after your own heart, you was plumb right. I'm after it. When I get back, I'll be claimin' it...."

## - 5 -

THE MIDDAY sun beat down on boulder-strewn ridges, and Johnny Morgan sweated in the saddle. But he was happy enough. So far, everything was fine. His long-striding mare had put a lot of miles behind in the eight hours since leaving the Lazy J, and Johnny hadn't run into any strangers.

Now he was riding along a bank of the river, winding northwest, the same river which, a long way to the east, passed the coulee where the cattle had been stampeded. Throughout the morning he had seen strays carrying the Lazy J brand, but not a sign of Red Nolan or the Durls. He had figured that they ought to be somewhere in the area, rounding up. That afternoon, there was still no sign of them.

He found a place where the river passed through a sheltered lane of rocks, and camped there at sundown. It was his first real stop, except for pauses to water the mare. But the long hours in the saddle were worth it, he figured, because now he was a long way from Sweetwater and could sleep easy. Among these riverside rocks he wasn't likely to be disturbed. Strangers could pass close by without suspecting his presence.

But he didn't risk a fire. Smoke and glare could be seen from vast distances, and he wasn't taking any risks. Apart from having no hankering to dangle at the end of a rope, the Jensens were depending on him. Their fate was bound up in whether he reached Durando.

He camped cold, ate a meal of tinned meat, biscuit and pie given him by Sam Ling, and drank from the river. Then he turned in.

But it was a long time before he slept. The dusk deepened to velvet black and the stars hung low in the sky, and Johnny Morgan still lay awake. He was thinking of Joan.

He fell asleep at last. When he came awake it was sun-up, and he swore softly. He had meant to be up and away before the sun showed. Smartly he scrambled out of his blanket and prepared a hasty breakfast. Half an hour later he was packed and ready to saddle up.

But Gal wasn't where he had left her. He'd found her a grassy spot near the water, well covered by surrounding boulders, and hadn't expected her to wander from it.

He swore again, at the delay. He walked about between the rocks but couldn't find the mare. Baffled, he found a great sloping boulder that towered above the rest, and climbed it. At the top he scanned the broken country around.

He spotted her at last. She was grazing at a patch of grass two hundred yards from the river, in open country. The Texan breathed his relief. The possibility of being left horseless had given him some anxious moments. He scrambled down from his perch and went to the horse.

He brought her back to the camp and saddled up. It was a bad start to the day, he thought, first waking late then wasting time to look for Gal. He was kind of superstitious about starting the day wrong.

He filled his canteen at the river, stowed it, and swung to the saddle. He headed north-west along the river, still moving in the cover of scattered boulders and trees. He'd been riding for maybe half an hour when a six-gun shot shattered the morning stillness, the bullet fanning his face. Next moment, before he knew where the shot had come from, there was a swish of stinging rope and a tight noose clamped his arms to his sides.

Johnny yelled in startled rage, trying to free himself. But the lasso bit into his flesh and yanked him from the

saddle. He hit the ground hard, while Gal pranced about excitedly. Next moment there were skidding hoofs and shouting voices, and men swarmed all over the squirming Texan. He didn't have a chance.

In a short time his wrists were tied behind his back. Then they hauled him to his feet. There were four men, one of them wearing the badge of Marshal on his flapping leather vest. He was a lean man with heavy-lidded eyes and a great beak of a nose. Along one side of his neck there was a fairly fresh bullet-crease, healed but still very tender.

"Marshal Vanny, huh?" Johnny said, spitting dust from his mouth. "Always gets his man."

"That's right," Vanny grinned. "'Specially when the man's a killer. At Sweetwater we don't stand for respectable citizens bein' killed at the card table."

"You're a liar," Morgan said. "At Sweetwater you'd stand for anything. Includin' makin' war on battlin' old ranchers an' their daughters..."

VANNY HIT him and he sprawled awkwardly, his bound arms crunching under his weight. Vanny still grinned. He looked down at Johnny and said, "You're in no position to argue, Texan. And this ain't no time to be lyin' on your back...git up, blast you!"

"The poor hombre must be tired," a rat-faced man chuckled. "Mebbe I better help him up." He kicked Morgan as he struggled to his feet.

"Somethin' else to remember," Johnny spat, eyeing Rat Face.

"Where you're goin' you ain't gonna remember anythin'," the Marshal said. To one of his deputies, he said, "Go git that black mare. We'll put him on her."

"How in hell did you find me, anyway?" Johnny had to say something. There was a great cold fear inside him, and he had to cover it up somehow.

"Called at the Lazy J to pick you up," Vanny said. "Yes-t'day, early. Adams said you'd high-tailed it north. I figured he told the truth because he wanted me to think him a liar an' go south. So I came north."

"You're a right smart fella."

"I get by," the Marshal said. "Still, you had bad luck. Mightn't have spotted you if you hadn't crossed that open stretch after your hoss. Guess he strayed, huh? Too bad."

The deputy led Gal back and they shoved Johnny to the saddle. Even though his hands were tied securely they took no chances. They yanked the twin Colts from his holsters, then mounted their own horses.

"We'll mosey along the river aways," Vanny mused. "The trees here ain't hardly tall enough. Let's go."

They headed further north, where big boxwoods with spreading limbs were scattered. And now the fear pounded deep in Johnny Morgan, and he felt a little sick. He fought the sickness down and forced calm words from his lips.

"Mebbe you oughta take me to town an' have a trial, huh? Just to make it look good an' legal, I mean."

"Reckon not," Vanny grinned. "Already you've admitted to killin' Meyer, Jim Steele an' another. And in front o' witnesses. That's good enough for us."

Johnny squirmed his tied wrists, hoping against hope that he might get them free and make a bid for liberty. He was desperate. He'd been in tight spots before, but not like this. Always he'd had his free and healthy muscles to fight with, and his guns. Now he had nothing but his mind, and he thought hard, casting about for some ways of beating this set-up.

But it seemed hopeless. The party was nearing the boxwoods, and time was short.

THEY WENT in among the boxwoods. Johnny Morgan's wrists were burned sore with his struggle against the rope, but the knots were as tight as ever. The rat-faced man

"No one knows the stampede which killed our neighbor happened to start — but we dang well suspect."

pointed to a tree with a heavy overhanging bough, and said, "There's what we want, Marshal. He oughta dance good from that one."

"Dance is right," another deputy chuckled.

They slid from their saddles, and Vanny led Gal and stood her under the bough. The rat-faced hombre got a lasso from his saddle and tossed one end over the high limb. He was grinning viciously, enjoying himself.

He narrowed the noose, and came close to Gal to toss it over Morgan's head. The Texan's brain was working furiously and anything seemed worth a try. Like lightning his booted foot lunged sideways and caught Rat Face on the jaw. The deputy staggered away, dropping the rope. Johnny squeezed Gal's belly between his knees and whooped a command.

"Up, ol' Gal, let's go!"

The big black leaped forward, Johnny leaning with her to keep his balance. There was a yell from one of the men as he was sent sprawling by the plunging mare. In another moment she was away from the party, thundering wildly back along the riverbank.

Yells of rage echoed in the breeze, then six-guns roared. A hail of slugs burned the air around Morgan, one ripping the empty holster at his left thigh. Yelling encouragement to Gal, he hunched low in the saddle. But he had no control over her. His hands were still tied behind his back, and the mare could head where she liked.

Johnny wanted her to weave in and out among the rocks and trees along the river, making pursuit slow and difficult. Already he could see three of the hanging party in hot chase after him. But Gal had her own ideas, and swung away from the river. She wanted the open spaces, room to move.

She plunged up over a ridge and headed south over rolling grassland. She was really flying now, and the Texan kept his seat with difficulty. But in a moment the pursuers had also turned into the open, and the lead flew again. Shots cracked and made rolling echoes, the bullets fanning Morgan and his mount. The end would come at any moment, he thought. This luck couldn't hold.

He was right. The end came and it was bad. A bullet made a sickly red hole in Gal's neck. Johnny saw it and hunched himself for the fall. The big horse went on for another ten yards, then her legs buckled. There was a crashing moment of screams, dust and rolling bodies, and Johnny blacked out.

But the blackness was just a passing shadow, in his brain. In a moment he was conscious, and heard the stamp of hoofs up close. Dust billowed in thick clouds as the Marshal's party hauled to a stop. Morgan rolled away from skidding hoofs—and at that moment he realized that his fall had jerked his wrists free of their binding.

Already the men were out of their saddles and closing on the Texan. There were four of them now. Their guns were holstered, and Johnny kept his hands behind as if they were still tied. Through the haze of dust he saw Vanny's grinning face, closing down. Then there was a sudden volley of gunfire nearby, and the Texan was aware of more horsemen, shooting and yelling as they pranced their mounts into the scene.

HE DIDN'T know what was happening. It was chaos. He saw men fall and heard the sickly thump of bullets in flesh. And he saw Vanny lose interest in him, drawing a gun and turning to shoot at one of the newcomers.

Morgan kicked the Marshal's legs from under him, then rolled to engage him as he fell. Vanny's six-gun hurtled from his grip, and the Texan got his hands to Vanny's throat. But the hands were numb from being tied, and Vanny easily shook off the grip. He hit Johnny away and plunged to draw a second gun. At that moment the Texan's hand

closed on Vanny's first gun in the dust, and he lifted it. Two shots thundered in chorus. It was crossfire at close range, and somebody had to die.

Marshal Vanny died. Morgan took a light crease across the scalp as his own bullet smashed into Vanny's chest, and the beak-nosed lawman was dead before he settled in the dust. And at that moment Johnny realized that the fight was over. Two of Vanny's deputies lay dead, while the third was mounted and high-tailing it in a hail of lead. He got away.

"You all right, Texan?" Red Nolan asked.

"Yeh." Johnny grinned at Nolan and the Durl brothers as they sheathed their guns. "Yeh. . .scratched an' kinda battered, but still in one piece. You fellas timed your come-along purty good. I was due to swing from a tree."

Nolan helped him to his feet. He said, "We was roundin' up strays. Saw you bust outa them river boxwoods, ridin' like crazy with your hands tied. Then we saw Vanny's party, an' rode across to join in the fun. They was kinda interested in you an' we was on 'em before they knew what hit 'em. One got away, though."

"Not far, mebbe," Happy Durl drawled. "He's carryin' a hunk o' my lead low in the shoulder. Got an idea he won't make it back to town."

Good news, Johnny thought, for the missing man was Rat Face. He said, "Mebbe it's all for the best if he don't make it. Vanny left town to arrest me, an' for a few days he won't be missed. They'll think he's still out trailin' me. If they knew that a bunch o' Lazy J hands had killed him an' his deputies, they'd mebbe send out a crew o' gunmen to even things. That'd be bad. Somehow the Jensens have gotta hold out till I get back."

"Till you get back?" Nolan frowned. "Why, where're you goin'?"

"An' where's Kale Adams?" Jake Durl asked. "We understood you an' him was gonna join us in the roundup."

Then Johnny realized that the punchers knew nothing of his plan to enlist Durando, having been out on the range when it was decided upon. He told them the story, briefly. They whistled in surprise.

"Sounds like a wild idea," Nolan grinned, "but wild ideas work purty good sometimes. Good luck, Texan. Let's get you cleaned up an' movin' again. Ain't no time to lose. Every day's gonna count from now on, I reckon."

JOHNNY MORGAN was mighty thankful for the punchers' timely arrival and help, but he knew that he was going to leave this spot with a sadness in his heart. Gal was dead. He took one brief look at her, then turned away and didn't look again. He had wandered many States with her, and he didn't want her sprawled and stiffening body to make a picture in his mind. He wanted to remember her as she'd been, strong and long-striding, courageous.

He took Vanny's horse, a rangy buckskin whose lines suggested stamina. The Durls got his fancy Mex saddle off the dead Gal and cinched it on the buckskin. In half an hour, Johnny was ready to move again. He said, "Red, it might be an idea to hide these bodies. So long as Vanny's missin', no one'll care. But if he's found dead there'll be hell to pay."

"We'll take 'em to the riverbank an' pile stones on 'em," Nolan nodded. "An' we'll trail the wounded one an' plant him, if he's cashed in. Good luck, Texan. Hurry back with them danged owlhoots."

Johnny found his twin Colts stuck in Vanny's belt. He holstered them, swung aboard the buckskin and headed north. Soon he'd left the punchers behind and was loping between ridges that ran parallel to a sweep of the river. He kept to low ground, figuring to take no chances of being spotted by any more of Halley's men who might be around. In another day, he thought,

the dangers should be passed. By then he would be close to the border and nearing the Black Hills of Dakota.

The Black Hills were Durando territory. Morgan wasn't likely to run into any danger once he was there. Now he urged the buckskin in an effort to make up lost time. The rangy horse was strong and speedy enough when pushed, but not particularly willing. Johnny had to drive him all the time.

That night he camped in a canyon, tying the horse to a length of rope which allowed him a good grazing circle round a tree. It was Gal's wandering off in the night which had caused him all the trouble with the Vanny posse.

HE SLEPT soundly after the hard day, but was awake at dawn. By sun-up he had left the canyon far behind, and from then he made good time. He left the river at last to go due north, for there were plenty of fresh-running creeks emptying from a rim of mountain far to his right. He didn't stop to eat at midday. His only stops were at the creeks, to let the buckskin freshen up.

The horse was wearing well, Johnny loping him and walking him in alternate stretches, keeping to a good overall pace. And that was the way of things for the rest of the journey.

At the end of the fourth day, Johnny Morgan was right where he'd planned to be. High in the Black Hills. He'd been climbing the gradual slopes all afternoon, and hadn't seen a sign of human life.

But he wasn't fooled. Now he was headed for the hidden township that was Durando's headquarters, and no man could get so close without Durando knowing. There were eyes watching him from the ridges and peaks, he knew. Eyes, sometimes with binoculars. And there were messages being passed between sentries and their chief, plotting Morgan's progess. Unless....

The thought sent a flash of anxiety through him. Suppose that the bandits were out on a job? It would mean more delay. Johnny having to wait for their return. And after one rampage they wouldn't want to start on another straight away. Johnny Morgan shook the idea from his mind. It was too frightening to think about. Somehow he just had to get the bandits to mosey along to Sweetwater, and pronto. It was the Jensens' only chance of survival.

He followed the trail he remembered well, along winding paths chopped to fine dust by the hoofs of many horses. Already the sun had dipped in the west, and Johnny knew that he wouldn't be allowed to go much further without being challenged.

It was a good guess. He rounded the base of a cliff and started up a fresh slope that was the floor of an open canyon. There was a crash of rifle-fire, and a bullet spurted dust a yard ahead of the buckskin. The horse plunged, but Johnny quickly brought him to heel. Then a great voice echoed down the canyon.

"Johnnee Morgannn, my frien'! Eet ees you, yes? 'Ullo, 'ullo!"

## - 6 -

JOHNNY MORGAN watched the white Arab horse plunge recklessly down the slope, its rider a graceful mixture of whipcord and steel swaying with the movement. Behind Durando another horse carried a small, grinning Mexican Johnny remembered as Santos. Johnny lifted a hand in friendly salute, and tried to match the bandit's thunderous greeting.

"Hullo there, Durando! I keep my promise, you see. I come to visit my good friend!"

"Ha, eet ees good!" Durando

boomed. "The frien'sheep ees sometheeng to value much, yes? Gold, he ees notheeng, but the frien'ship...ha! Eet ees good to see you Johnnee!"

He was alongside the Texan, reaching from his saddle to grip Morgan's hand. The bandit was swarthy and lean, with darkly glowing eyes, a wide black mustache and gleaming teeth. He laughed, good and hard, the way he did everything.

"Eet was so funnee! A stranger climbeeng the heels, they tell Durando. A stranger makeeng for the campo. An' Durando come heemself, wanta see who thees lone hombre ees who dare climb Durando's heels. Then Durando see the ol' frien' from Texas, on the ol' Mexicano saddle what Durando geeve heem—only the cayuse is deeferent. What happen to the ol' black what you love so much?"

"Faithful to the last," Johnny said. "Stopped a bullet that was meant for me. But it's a long story. I'll tell you later, huh?"

"Over the roast peeg an' the good wine, my frien'. Durando, he put on the beeg feest for to welcome hees frien', yes. Santos, hurree ahead an' tell the cooks, amigo."

Later, over the big meal, Durando was more like a genial squire than a feared bandit chief. He entertained Johnny, Santos, and a Montana renegade who was his right-hand man. The renegade's name was Olsen, a bearded giant who'd helped plan some of Durando's biggest raids. The four men were waited upon by willing Mexicans, who glided about silently, and it was hard to realize that this was the center of a wild mountain township populated entirely by bandits.

Yet such it was. Durando had been entrenched here for three years now, ever since he'd had to flee from his native Mexico with a platoon of soldiers after him. He'd found this hidden valley in the Black Hills, and had gradually gathered about himself the biggest gang of owlhoots in the West.

"An' now mebbe you tell Durando for why you come, yes?" the bandit chief said when, at last, the feast was finished and they lingered over cigars and wine. He looked at Morgan, showing his teeth in an eager smile. "Mebbe you come to join us here, yes? Mebbe you tired o' punching the cattle for the leetle monee, yes?"

JOHNNY grinned. "No, I'll stay honest, I reckon. Seems to me, it's kinda safer."

"Per'aps." Durando shrugged. "I am sorree, amigo. I theenk we make the preety good team, yes?"

"No," the Texan said. "But every man to his own taste, an' I can see how the adventure side of it must kinda appeal to a fella like you. Been on any big jobs lately?"

"No, no. We have the long rest after the beeg train robberee in Dakota. Soon mebbe Durando ride again."

"Ever think o' ridin' south?" Johnny asked quietly. "Down Sweetwater way, I mean."

"Sweetwater? Jus' the leetle cowtown, I theenk. No, my frien'. Always Durando look for the big prize..." Suddenly he smiled, flashed a look at Olsen, and said, "the beeg prize an' the leetle treasure, yes?" Then he grinned at Johnny and said. "Later, Durando show you hees leetle treasure, yes?"

"Sure," Morgan said. "But getting gack to Sweetwater...there is something that might interest you. A bank."

"A bank?" Olsen, who spoke little, looked at Johnny curiously. He said, "A small-time branch, handlin' peanuts. Durando ain't in the amateur class."

Durando laughed his agreement, while Santos, who always shaped his face with that of his master, laughed also. Johnny shrugged.

"There's an hombre named Ross Halley, who banks at Sweetwater. Halley owns all the ranches in the Sweetwater Valley country—all except one. His income's kinda big. An' though the Sweetwater bank passes its deposits to

headquarters in the East, there must always be a lotta dinero on hand."

"I see." Durando had narrowed his eyes, looking thoughtfully at the Texan. "An' for why d'you tell us thees, my frien'?"

"Because I'd like to see you raid Sweetwater," Johnny said, "an' I know there'd have to be something to make it worth your while. I figure that the bank would make it well worth your while."

"You mean you've got an axe to grind?" Olsen grinned. "Got a grudge against somebody at Sweetwater, Hell, I don't reckon we'd be interested. . ."

"Wait, amigo," Durando said. "Thees ees my frien' you speak to. Eef he want Durando should raid Sweetwater, then Durando do eet."

JOHNNY'S heart leaped He looked at Olsen, who shrugged. To Durando, he said, "You're the boss, Lou. But Sweetwater's four or five days' ride away, an' I don't reckon there'd be enough in it for us."

"What matter?" the chief said. "You have forgot what happen las' year, yes? Durando not forget. Durando he down in flooded reever, except thees Johnnee Morgannn, he reesk hees life for to save. Now Durando he pay back the debt. Johnnee wants for Sweetwater to be shot up, we do eet, no matter eef the bank have no monee at all." Then he smiled widely. "Much better eef the bank have lotta monee, of course. You say eet pack plentee dinero, Johnnee?"

"Plenty," Morgan said. "And there're saloons an' gamblin' halls with lots o' cash on hand. It'll pay, Durando. An' you'll be doing me a big favor."

"All right, amigo. Now mebbee you tell us the whole storee, yes?"

And Johnny told it. About his shooting of Meyer in the saloon, his flight from town, his meeting with Joan Jensen. And all about the desperate plight of the Jensens, being squeezed out of business by the greedy and brutal Ross Halley. Johnny told it well, and let Durando know how much the Jensens needed help, and how quickly.

"Every day counts," he said. "The Jensens jus' can't hold out much longer. . .and they are my friends, Durando."

"How many men thees Halley hombre got, Johnnee?"

"Around fifty. Most of 'em at Sweetwater, a few at the Square W Ranch a few miles out. I figured you could mebbe shoot up the W on the way home, jus' to complete the job."

"Durando got seventy men," the bandit said proudly. "We leave tomorrow. Olsen, my frien', go tell everybody for to make readee. Santos, amigo, go see the cooks for to pack the proveesions. Johnnee, you stay weeth Durando, tell heem all 'bout thees Sweetwater, yes. An all 'bout thees leetle Senorita Jensen what you mebbe love, yes?" All rumbled loud laughter at his shrewd joke.

After that there was much activity in the valley, sounds of movement and voices in the night. Some of the voices were raised in song. Durando said, "They are happee, Johnee. They look forward to the beeg excitement. . .An' by golly, so do I."

They sat smoking and talking until far into the night, until the Texan yawned and said he would like to turn in. Durando gave him a bunk in his own cabin. But the chief didn't go to bed himself. He said something in Spanish to Santos, and Johnny caught the word Lolita. Then he went out.

Johnny smiled to himself, remembering Durando's talk of a "leetle treasure." Then he thought of his own Joan Jensen, and suffered untold anxieties wondering whether the raid on Sweetwater would be in time.

NEXT MORNING Johnny woke to find Durando's army of outlaws already assembling. From the cabin window he watched them, the wildest collection of renegades he'd ever seen, each man well armed and strongly

mounted. Almost the entire population was going, only one cook and a couple of sick men remaining. There would be sixty-eight all told, Durando said.

"Jus' look at them, my frien'," he boomed at Johnny. "The danged beegest army of oulaws since Panch Villa's, yes? We geeve thees Halley hombre hell, I tell you!"

There was a good breakfast in the cabin, after which Johnny saddled up the buckskin and was ready to go. He'd brought enough provisions for the return journey, and didn't need to take from the outlaws' pile. But he accepted extra Colt ammunition from Durando, and a Winchester repeater. Then, as they were ready to join the main body, Durando said, "But firs' I must sad adios to my leetle treasure, yes? An' you have not seen her. Johnnee. Come."

He took the Texan to another cabin and rapped on the door. A young woman, dark-eyed and smiling, opened the door. She was very lovely, Johnny saw. Durando took her up in his arms, swung her around, and boomed laughter.

"Look at her, Johnnee. My leetle treasure. Is she not ver' beauteeful?"

"Very beautiful," Johnny grinned. "You're a lucky hombre. Where'd you find her?"

The girl blushed, trying to squirm from Durando's arms, yet looking at him adoringly. Durando held her tight, laughing gaily.

"Found her on the train, Johnnee. We hold up the mail train een Dakota an' take plentee dinero. But the monee, he ees notheeng! The love...ha! Durando see the preety passenger, an' she of hees own race. So Durando take her."

"You...you took her?" Johnny frowned.

"Of course! To find the so beauteeful Mexicano een thees gringo countree... Durando could not turn his back on such luck, no? So he carree her off, you bet. She the danged leetle wildcat at firs', but now she love me good. Durando the ver' luckee hombre, yes?"

Morgan looked at the laughing girl and was in no doubt that she loved Durando. It was written in the way she looked at him. Johnny was thankful that it was so, and walked away to let them say their farewells in private.

That Durando!

He went back to his waiting buckskin, swung to the saddle, and rode to join the army of horsemen in the valley. Santos and Olsen were there at the head of the bunch. Olsen grinned a greeting at Johnny. He seemed to have got over his prejudices against the raid.

"The boss's sayin' his goodbyes, I'll bet," he grinned. "Got it bad, he has. Really loves that little senorita, an' she him. Reckon I'll find me a gal the same way one o' these days."

Johnny thought it best not to say anything. He didn't like Olsen, had never liked him, but he didn't want to quarrel with Durando's right-hand man.

Now Olsen saw the disapproval in the Texan's eyes, and shrugged. Johnny knew that it set the seal on a secret enmity. But he didn't care. After this business was finished with he would never see Olsen again. Nor Durando, for that matter. If Joan was willing, he would make her his wife, take her back to Texas and settle down.

DURANDO appeared, riding his white Arab, and the big party started forward. With Durando, Johnny Morgan and Olsen leading, they rode out of the valley and headed down the sloping trail in a cloud of rising dust. The great adventure had begun.

Soon Johnny was able to see how these big raids were organized. Durando had several Indian and half-breed scouts who rode well ahead and reported at intervals. They topped peaks and ridges to scan the countryside, and sometimes Durando altered course slightly on their advice.

The success of these big raids de-

pended on surprise. Durando liked to swoop on his target without warning, rendering the inhabitants helpless at gunpoint before they realized what was happening. For that reason, he always tried to avoid meeting up with strangers beforehand. A town, ranch, or goldcamp could offer stiff opposition when forewarned.

So it was that, acting on the reports of his scouts, he continually altered course to miss roving cattle, cowhands and small settlements. It took a little extra time, and picking out grassed country to avoid too much dust-raising took more time, but it was the best way. Johnny was just as anxious that Sweetwater should be taken by surprise, though he chafed at the delay.

The outlaw band were out of the Black Hills by early afternoon. They headed south then, and at sundown they made camp in a sheltered coulee ringed with brush and boulders. There were no fires. The bandits camped cold, as they always did when on a raid. And when they turned in, a ring of armed sentries protected them. Johnny slept but little, worrying about the Jensens.

Were they still holding out, he wondered. What about Rat Face, who had escaped from the shooting rumpus with one of Happy Durl's bullets in his shoulder. Had Red Nolan and the boys caught up with him? Or had the deputy reached town to spill the story that Marshall Vanny had been killed by Lazy J hands.

If he had, there would be hell to pay. Indeed, the ruthless Ross Halley might well jump at the chance to wipe out the Lazy J staff, thereby forcing Bob Jensen to give up the unequal struggle and sell out. It seemed to Johnny that a lot depended on whether Rat Face had made it to town.

Next day the Durando army continued south, making good time. They reached the river at midday, crossed it, and followed its winding course southeast. The plentiful trees and rocks that lined the river made good cover, and the party strung out to almost single file, taking advantage of it.

But close to sundown, the thing they'd been trying to avoid, happened. For once, Durando's scouts missed out. Santos spotted a lone rider on a ridge to the west, and pointed him out. The rider was watching the outlaw band. Johnny saw him suddenly heel his horse away and head towards Sweetwater. He was riding fast.

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JOHNNY MORGAN said to Durando, "Leave him to me. If he's catchable, I'll catch him. You keep movin', and I'll join up with you later."

"That hombre's gotta be stopped," Durando agreed, "but mebbe you better have help, Johnnee. My frien' Olsen..."

"No...I can move faster along these ridges on my own." It was a poor excuse, but he didn't want to work with Olsen. Quickly he swung the buckskin away, calling back to Durando, "Keep movin' an' go through with the raid, whether I get back to you or not..."

"Adios," the bandit called after him. "An' good luck."

Johnny headed the buckskin south, loping him up a long slope of grass to a line of ridges. From there he hoped to spot the fleeing rider. Seeing that the man was heading townward, it seemed to Morgan that he could only be a Halley man. Somehow, the Texan had to stop him.

He reached the ridges and reined back. From there the range rolled away in a series of hollows and hills, and there was no sign of the rider. Johnny waited impatiently. Until the hombre showed himself it was useless

to ride any further. He could only be down in one of the hollows, and must surely come in view soon.

It was a good guess. He saw the man and horse come out of a small coulee to top a ridge and head along its backbone. It was a long, curying ridge that circled to the east. It was bald, and good for fast riding. Johnny judged that the rider would keep to the ridge, and set out to cut him off in the east.

The buckskin covered the ground quickly, through draws and between parallel ridges that hid Morgan from his quarry. Keeping to cover like that, he hoped to surprise the man. But it took him longer than he'd figured, and by the time he'd reached the eastern end of the bald ridge the rider was nowhere in sight.

Now the Texan was baffled. Had the hombre already passed, or had he turned off? Morgan scanned a lot of surrounding country, and still there was no sign of the rider. Johnny gambled that he'd turned off southward, and loped the buckskin in that direction. He could only hope that he'd guessed right.

The sun went down and its glow gradually faded in the west, and still Johnny Morgan had not sighted his quarry. He swore softly, convinced that he'd come the wrong way, that the unknown man had actually passed the end of that bald ridge before Johnny had reached it. Yet he kept on. It was too late to go back and take the other route now.

*Might as well keep on an' hope that my g u e s s was right after all,* he thought glumily.

But the dusk came, deepening until it was impossible for him to scan distance any more. Reluctantly he made camp, deciding to eat, to turn in early, and get going at dawn the next morning. As yet, he couldn't make up his mind whether he would continue the search or abandon it and return to the outlaw band.

BY THE TIME the stars glowed, Johnny was asleep. Later, he thought about that night and wondered why he'd drifted asleep so soon, when wakefulness might have saved him pain and disaster.

It was a frightening shock, coming from sleep to wakefulness with hot pain burning his arm and a crashing shot echoing in his ears. Yet a kind of instinct flared in him, rising above the shock and the pain to send him rolling frantically sideways in the dark as other shots crashed.

Fully awake now, the Texan felt the breath of bullets and heard them slap into the earth around him. Outlined against the sky, perhaps fifteen feet away, he glimpsed the figure of a man. In the same flashing instant he brought his good arm into action, plunging for a Colt.

The Colt spat twice, and the dark figure staggered away. Morgan had had an easy mark to shoot at, being low on the ground while the enemy's body was a black shape against the stars. Now he lay where he'd rolled, in the darkness of thorny scrub, his arm hurting like hell, his ears straining for sound of the enemy.

In a moment the sound came. Away out of sight, beyond rocks, there was a muffled thump, like a body falling to the ground. Then Johnny heard the sounds of gasping and vomiting. But not for long. Soon there was only the stillness of the night, the croak of insects and the stirring of the wild creatures.

Johnny holstered his gun, and felt the wound in his arm. It was near the one he'd collected a few days earlier, and there was a lot of blood. But he gritted his teeth and probed, sweating with pain, but satisfying himself that the bullet had passed safely through.

Groping about in the dark, he found his canteen of water and drank a little. Then he washed his wound, using only the light of the stars, and tore strips of neckerchief to bind it tight-

ly. It took a long time, and at the end he was sick and exhausted. He straightened his blanket, fixed his saddle as a head-rest, and lay back.

He kept thinking of that nightmare awakening, with the stabbing pain and the echoing crash. He would never understand why he hadn't been killed. But one thing he did understand. He had been very neatly lured into a trap.

That hombre who'd watched the Durando gang had been cunning. He'd spotted the Texan chasing him. And now it was clear that he'd out-thought Morgan. He had guessed that Johnny meant to cut him off at the ridge. So, somewhere along it, he had taken to cover, watched Morgan's arrival, and followed him from there.

*Blast me for a fool,* Johnny thought. *All the time I was watchin' ahead, he was followin' behind. But I ain't complainin'. Right now I'm danged lucky to be alive.*

He fell into a troubled doze and slept fitfully until dawn. The pain in his arm was still bad, but it hadn't bled much since the cleaning. Johnny scrambled awkwardly to his feet and went looking for his dead adversary. He had heard death in those final gasps last night.

THE HOMBRE lay huddled against a boulder. Johnny's bullets had smashed his scalp and throat. But there was enough of him left to reveal beetling brows and thick lips, and Johnny recognized him.

"Won't be playin' any more poker," the Texan said, "'less he an' his friend Myer can, mebbe, rustle up a game over the Divide."

He went back to the saddlepack and forced himself to eat some salt meat and biscuit. Then he packed up, deciding to figure a course which would take him to the southeast-bound Durando gang. He went to look for the buckskin. The animal was gone.

Dully, Johnny Morgan stared at a hacked length of rope that trailed from a tree. He had left the buckskin tied for the night, with a good length of rope to let him move about. And that hombre last night must have cut the horse loose. Now Johnny yelled and whistled, but there was neither sight nor sound of the buckskin.

The frightening truth was soaking into his mind, but he tried to ignore it. He thought: *Beetle-brow's hoss. He dismounted somewhere handy, so's he could sneak up on me. His hoss might still be around.*

He went looking for it. He found a tall, sloping boulder and climbed it. Scanning the eastern range, he spotted a saddled but riderless horse that loafed at a stream. He thought, *half-a-mile, mebbe. I've got to make it. I've jus' got to have a hoss!*

He thought hard. He knew that his bad arm wound was taking its toll and he wasn't as strong as he'd like to be. But at the same time he knew that horses were hard to catch, if the catcher was unmounted, and he didn't want to have to walk all the way back to pick up provisions if the animal bolted. On the other hand, he was beyond humping his big Mex saddle for a half a mile.

*Better play safe,* he thought. He went back to his pack, unstrapped it from the saddle, and shouldered it. Then he headed for the horse at the distant stream, aiming to return for the saddle if he caught the animal. If he failed, there would be nothing for it but to continue south on foot. That would be hell, he thought, and chafed at the idea of missing all the fun of the raid.

The danged horse was wandering. Just leisurely, pausing to graze here and there—but always somehow moving away from Johnny's approach. A cunning cayuse, but acting just the way Morgan had feared. Sometimes the Texan got to within twenty yards of it, but always the beast would lope leisurely away. Johnny began to sweat and swear.

THE MADDENING game went on for hours. The only good thing about it was that most of the movement was southward. The sun climbed high and the pack on Morgan's shoulder was like a lead weight, but still the horse stayed out of reach.

It crossed a shallow stream, paused to drink at the other side, then plunged into a clump of boxwoods as Johnny splashed into the stream. The Texan groaned. He dumped his pack on the other bank, drank from the flowing water, and rested awhile. The despair was deep in him now.

He didn't see the horse again. It had apparently grown tired of the one-sided game and bolted away. Resignedly, Johnny continued southward. His one hope now was that he might meet one of the Lazy J hands riding range. It was a desperate hope.

With frequent rests to regain lost strength, the Texan walked doggedly southward. The sun beat down cruelly, its heat striking upward from the sea of grass. The pack seemed to weigh a ton. Morgan was glad of just one thing, his parting request to Durando to go through with the raid whether Johnny rejoined him or not.

That, after all, was the really vital thing. The sooner Durando smashed the Halley gang, the sooner the relief of pressure on the Jensens. Provided the Lazy J was saved, Morgan didn't care how far he had to walk. But he sure regretted having to miss the action.

That night he made camp by a stream, had a quick meal, and turned in. He hadn't spotted a soul, but he'd covered a fair bit of ground and there was every chance that he might meet a Lazy J puncher on the morrow. This was free range, and within grazing distance of the J. At the same time, it was also within grazing distance of the Square W, and he might be unlucky enough to meet up with a Halley rider.

*An' how will I know a Halley rider,* he asked himself. And he swore. Any puncher in the territory who wasn't a Lazy J man just had to be a Halley man.

WHEN HE woke up at sunrise, Morgan was stiff and tired from the unaccustomed exercise. Until then, he had lived most of his life in the saddle. This long-distance walking was plain hell. But he shouldered his pack and started off again doggedly, and found that movement and sweating relieved the stiffness a little.

He pushed on, watching for some sign of human life.

But human life was the one thing missing. There were scurrying jackrabbits and lizards, and insects, and sometimes a buzzard circling high, and during the afternoon Johnny got close enough to a bunch of grazing steers to read the Square W brand. But never once did he see a man or horse. His feet felt raw, and his body ached, and sometimes his wounded arm throbbed maddeningly. But he pushed onward.

That night he didn't sleep much. The aches and pains discouraged sleep, and so did his active brain. It was full of conjecture and calculation. Would the owlhoot gang have gone into action by now? He counted back over the days, and decided that they must have reached Sweetwater by now. He wondered how successful the raid had been. Maybe they'd called in at the Square W, too, by now, and had smashed Halley's staff of hoodlums. Then he remembered that Durando might not know where to find the Square W. Johnny had meant to have one of the Lazy J boys guide him there. Again he cursed at the way everything had gone wrong.

Before moving the next morning, he lightened the pack. He threw away everything he could possibly do without, even the extra Colt ammunition and the Winchester Durando had given him. He just couldn't carry the weight any more. Reducing the pack to the bare food and water necessary to keep

him alive, and even leaving the blanket behind, he trudged on again.

He was tired and a little sick. And, as the sun began to climb, he found it hard to direct his thoughts. It was as if his burdened brain was dazed, a little muddled. He found himself staggering.

His rests and sips at the canteen became more frequent, but his strength didn't improve. His arm had gone numb, and his brain became more and more confused. He had to stop sometimes and think hard before fixing his direction. Once, after a rest at a stream, he found himself moving back over his tracks. Savagely he shook his head, trying to rise above the weakness that plagued him.

That night he threw himself down at the base of a cottonwood tree and slept the sleep of exhaustion. It was just a blackout, dreamless and heavy, and he didn't come out of it until the sun was high in the sky next morning. When he slowly got to his feet he felt dizzy, but it wore off. He forced some food and water down his throat, and felt stronger. His brain, too, seemed clearer, and he knew that the long sleep had restored him.

But he knew that when he started walking again, in this blazing heat, he would quickly weaken once more. That was something he had to avoid. He began to think that it might be better to spend the day in rest under the cottonwood, and try to move onward in the night. It seemed like a good idea. After all, he had missed the raid on Sweetwater. Now his only concern was to stay alive until he reached friends again.

But before resting, he figured he'd better have a look around. There might be riders about, Lazy J hands, to end his ordeal. He saw a high ridge of boulders nearby, and trudged slowly up its slope. When he got to the top he looked south—and saw two riders headed his way. They were, maybe, a mile away, but moving slowly. Johnny Morgan frowned. And his good hand moved to a gun holster.

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JOHNNY MORGAN was looking at those distant riders and seeing two figures who were both familiar to him. Even at the distance, he recognized the set of them in the saddles, and one of the horses. He shaded his squinting eyes and was sure. And once more he eased the Colt in his right-side holster.

Thoughts began tumbling through his brain, and anxieties plagued him. He thought of his own weakened condition. And he thought of the slighter of those two riders, straight-backed aboard her pinto, golden hair spilling from under her sombrero to shine in the sun. Yes, she was Joan Jensen, there was no doubt about it.

And the man who rode with her? Yes, Morgan knew him, too. And he knew that Joan did not ride with him willingly.

*And here I am without a hoss,* he thought desperately. *They're headed this way, but they might turn off. And I can't chase 'em if they do.*

But if they kept to their present course they would pass close by, and that was the Texan's one hope. Then the rest would be up to him. He settled himself low among the ridge-top boulders, and watched. And prayed.

They must not turn off. They must keep headed his way. The thoughts repeated themselves in his mind, Johnny watching the approach with strained eyes and thumping heart. The approach was slow, the horses walking. And sometimes they appeared to swing away east, and Johnny's heart would thump wilder until, casually,

they would turn toward his ridge again. The distance lessened slowly. Now they were, maybe, half a mile away.

Then Morgan realized that they would have to change course slightly, to the east or west, and soon. It didn't make sense that they would climb their horses up the slope of the ridge and down the other side. The natural course was to skirt it.

The ridge was, maybe, four hundred yards long, and the Texan was right at the western tip. If they came that side, everything would be fine.

But, of course, they didn't. He saw them turn to the east, and through burning eyes he saw them stick to the course this time, and he swore. They were aiming to circle the ridge to the east. The Texan got to his feet and began to hurry along the ridge.

IT WAS ROUGH walking, between passages of boulders and over rocky paths. There were up-grades and a lot of broken ground, and tricky slopes of sheer rock which reflected the heat and brought the sweat oozing from his skin. His legs began to shake with weakness and a touch of the old dizziness returned.

But Morgan forced himself to hurry. He wanted to reach the other end of the ridge before the couple came level with it. He wanted a short rest and time to shake off the dizziness before he began shooting. And he sure was determined to begin shooting.

It seemed miles along the ridge-top. He lost sight of the approaching riders, but didn't worry about them. They were down in a coulee, he figured, and he wouldn't see them again until he reached the end of his ridge. Sweating and trembling with fatigue, he staggered on.

He climbed one last bulge of rock which seemed to take his entire remaining strength, then stumbled down an easy slope of smaller boulders and found himself at the end of the ridge. It finished in a fall-away of rubble with rocky outcrops lowering to the grassy range. Johnny threw himself down in the shade of a mesquite clump and waited for the maddening dizziness to clear.

His sweating stopped and his breathing became more regular. His head cleared a little. He was watching the rim of the coulee, below and to the south. Sooner than he'd wanted to, he saw the riders come out of the hollow.

He needed a longer rest, but now he wouldn't get it. In a minute or two, the couple would pass below. Morgan fingered the butt of his Colt. Now he could see that Joan's wrists were roped to the saddlehorn, her pinto being led by the hombre who was with her. And Johnny began a battle with his conscience.

*It would be kinda easy,* he thought, *to draw a careful bead on him an' drop him as he passes. Kinda easy. And why not? He's a yellow polecat and I'm in no condition for a two-way ruckus. Does a woman-snatchin' polecat like him rate an even break?*

*I'll kill him,* Johnny thought. *He'll never know what hit him. I'll put a slug through his danged head. Here he comes. What's to stop me at this range? An easy twenty-five yards.*

And having told himself all that, Johnny Morgan stood up in clear view and yelled down the rocky slope: "Go for your gun, Olsen. I'm goin' for mine!"

Olsen and Joan jerked upward glances, Joan's suddenly hopeful face photographing itself in the Texan's mind even as Olsen clawed at his forty-five. Morgan raked out his Colt and fired.

HIS SHOT beat Olsen's by a minute, but both missed. Morgan fired again as Olsen let go the rope lead from Joan's mount and slid from his saddle. Again Johnny missed. The outlaw dived for boulders at the foot

of the slope, flinging a wild shot as he took cover. The slug tore through Morgan's hat brim.

Swearing at his bungling, Johnny dropped back to his clump of mesquite. Joan's pinto had plunged away at the shooting, but Joan's urgent words of command had quieted him and now he stood still. From behind a boulder below, Olsen's voice boomed. "You sneakin' coyote, M o r g a n. Thought you was Durando's friend. What's the idea?"

"You ain't Durando," Johnny called back. "You're no friend o' mine, Olsen. But because you're Durando's side-kick, if you drop your gun an' get on your hoss an' hit the breeze, I'll let you go."

"You'll let me go, huh?" The outlaw's sneering voice boomed back. "Now ain't that right kind o' you. But when I go, I aim to take this filly with me. You got any sense, you'll mosey off pronto an' mind your own business."

"When I see a danged owlhoot with a gal tied to a hoss, that's my business," Johnny yelled.

"Why the hell! Only doin' what Durando done. Gets mighty lonesome livin' up in them danged hills. What's it to you, anyway?"

"Plenty," Morgan called. "Start shootin' Olsen."

"J o h n n y. . . watch out!" Joan called. "He's working up the slope."

"Thanks, Joan," Morgan called back. He snaked to the more solid cover of a rocky slab, and heard Olsen's voice once more.

"Johnny. . . Joan. . . so that's it. You got a pers'nal interest in this filly, huh, Morgan? All right. I'll fight you for her."

"Polecat!" Morgan raged. "Show yourself, an' I'll kill you!"

"Johnny!" Joan yelled again. "Now he's working closer, behind those outcrops. . ."

"Shut up!" Olsen thundered. "I should've gagged you, sweetheart. Another word outa you an' I'll plug that purty pinto o' yours."

Johnny saw Olsen's hat showing above an outcrop. He threw a shot and the hat disappeared. He heard the owlhoot's gruff laughter.

"Durando said you could shoot, Morgan, but it seems like you ain't so hot. Now I understand why you deserted the raidin' party, leavin' us to shoot up Sweetwater without you."

"Seems like you've done a bit o' desertin' yourself," Johnny said, stealthily working from one rock to another in a plan to get a sight of the outlaw.

"Saw the job through, though, first. We smashed Sweetwater. We shot up the saloons. We robbed the bank an' left the staff hog-tied. Then I left Durando to go find myself a filly. When I tell Durando what a double-crossin' coyote you turned out, he'll thank me for killin' you."

"How're you gonna kill me, skulkin' behind them rocks like that?" Johnny taunted.

A bullet skidded off rock a foot from his face, and he heard the owlhoot say, "I'll get you, all in good time. I'll get you."

JOHNNY tried to judge his position from the voice. He chanced a look over his rocky slay and saw just a scattering of boulders dotting the slope ahead. Behind one of them, and danged close now, Olsen lurked.

The Texan looked down at Joan on her pinto, but got no hint from her. She just looked up at him, her face white with strain. He guessed that Olsen had bellied behind cover which hid him from the girl. Silently, still trying to shake the dizziness from his head and stop the tired trembling of his limbs, Morgan snaked his way from one rock to another, working backward and to his right. He came to rest behind rubble and mesquite, and did some thinking.

He was far from well, and knew it. If he hadn't known it, his bad shoot-

ing at Olsen would have shown him. It just wasn't like him to miss at twenty-five yards, yet he'd missed twice. You needed an ice-cool head and steady hands for good shooting, and he had neither. He would have to use his brains, think of some way to take Olsen by surprise, close up. He cursed himself for not going through with the bushwhacking plan he'd toyed with.

An idea occurred to him. He picked up a pebble and tossed it high, so that it clicked on stones away to his left. He watched the scattered boulders ahead. He saw Olsen's gun hand snake from behind a boulder just six yards away, and saw his hat rise beyond. He was aiming at where the falling pebble had sounded.

Only the tip of the hat was showing, but Olsen's hand was in full view. He was watching that spot at Johnny's left, waiting for something to shoot at. Johnny took slow and careful aim, and fired.

WHILE THE crack still echoed, Olsen's gun clattered away and the hand disappeared. And while the outlaw still yelped with pain, Morgan left his cover to stagger across the slope. He rounded Olsen's boulder and came face to face with the forty-five. He dropped to the ground as it thundered and the slug passed close to his face. Olsen had been ready, the gun changed over to his left hand.

These thoughts flashed through the Texan's mind as he flung a hurried shot at close quarters while rolling to avoid another left-handed one from Olsen. The shots thundered in chorus, but both missed. Morgan figured that his Colt would be empty by now, and flung it at Olsen's face. The owlhoot ducked away and dropped his forty-five clumsily. Johnny was close to him now, and it was quicker to grapple with him than to make an awkward attempt to draw his left-side Colt with his right hand.

He grabbed the bearded man round the neck and rolled with him. They came up hard against rock and Olsen punched wildly at the Texan's face. Johnny fell away and Olsen swung a booted foot to kick him in the chest. And during these frantic moments Morgan was realizing that he and the owlhoot were evenly matched.

Yes, both men were fighting one-handed. The owlhoot's gunhand was smashed and useless, while the two wounds in Johnny's left arm made two-handed fighting impossible for him.

But Olsen was big and powerful, and Johnny Morgan was weakened. It was going to be tough. Now the outlaw was swinging left-handed blows at his face, while Johnny tried to wrap an arm round his neck. He got the arm locked, and threw Olsen. He fell with him. They rolled again, the outlaw growling like an animal. Morgan held on desperately, holding the neck locked, and using his knees to thump at the big man's belly.

Then he felt a clawing hand jerk the Colt from his left-side holster. Swiftly he let the neck go and tried to snatch the gun away. But Olsen was too quick, breaking free to raise the gun at close quarters. Morgan kicked at it as the shot crashed. The slug burned his hair as the Colt clattered away.

Olsen cursed and came at the Texan. Johnny was dizzy and sick, no strength in his legs. But in his excitement the outlaw threw his smashed right fist. It spattered blood in Johnny's eyes, but its contact with him

sent Olsen screaming with pain. He swayed away, slipped and fell.

Johnny moved down and forward. His head took the big man low and sprawled him, just as he tried to get up. Morgan fell on him with swinging fist and thumping knee, desperate to finish him while his own strength still glimmered. Soon the glimmer would go out, he knew.

The outlaw's strength was that of a horse, it seemed to Morgan. A big fist took the Texan on the chin and he crashed back over a rock. For a moment he balanced across the rock, then fell down the other side. He heard Joan Jensen scream with terror.

JOHNNY landed on his head and shoulders, but a clump of mesquite at the base of the boulder broke his fall. He rolled free of the mesquite, and something hard bit into the wounds on his arm. He gasped with pain—and saw that he'd rolled on Olsen's lost forty-five.

It looked like his last chance, and he took it. His fingers closed on the gun. Then the bearded figure of Olsen came lumbering down the slope, skirting the big boulder over which Johnny had fallen. And he, too, had a gun. One of Morgan's Colts. Johnny took it in at a glance, and Olsen roared.

"Here it is, Morgan...take it—"

Johnny brought the forty-five from behind his back and cut Olsen's voice at the throat. The words turned into a sickly gurgle, but some kind of reflex muscular action fired the gun in Olsen's dying hand. The slug burned across Johnny's left thigh as Olsen fell.

Johnny watched the twitching figure roll away down the slope, and saw the trail of blood turning the rubble brown. He heard Joan scream again. Then she called, almost fearfully, "Johnny...you got him... Oh, Texan...are you all right?"

Morgan fought off a surging sickness. He got to his feet and staggered down the slope, his boots skidding on the loose pebbles. Once he fell, his creased thigh throbbing, his head giddy and aching. Some kind of crazy desperation buzzed in him and he got to his feet again. *Joan,* he thought, *I've got to save her. I've got to...*

He half ran, half fell down the remaining slope, and staggered toward the girl on the pinto. Then he stared at her.

*She's all right,* he thought. *Olsen's dead, you dope.* He grasped the thought and held on to it. He started to laugh.

"Johnny, you're hurt," Joan cried. "Your arm...your leg. Oh, Texan..."

"Something for you to fuss over," he grinned. "You're kinda good at it, I remember."

He went to her and lifted his hands to free the rope from her reddened wrists. He got some of the knots undone—then the world began to spin and a great blackness closed over him...

JOHNNY MORGAN was in a room, and it would have been dark except for the spluttering lantern that hung from a wall. The lantern was the first thing that made sense, coming out of a fog to register clearly in his throbbing brain. Then the roaring in his ears lessened, and he heard friendly voices. He swung his gaze from the lantern, and focused it on the smiling faces of Bob Jensen, Red Nolan, and Kale Adams.

"You're all right, Texan," the rancher grinned. "Joan says you will be, an' that gal's as good as any doctor."

Johnny forced a grin to his puffed, aching face. He said, "So I'm all right. But what 'bout you? What 'bout the Lazy J?"

The J's all right, too, they all told him in chorus. And they told him

more. The Durando gang had ransacked Sweetwater, and had opened fire on the inhabitants when they'd tried to resist. The bank had been robbed, but none of the staff injured. But plenty of Halley's Sweetwater citizens had stopped bullets.

A lot of those citizens had died, and a few of the owlhoots had cashed in also. Johnny listened to it all, then frowned.

"Jus' the same, I bungled the job. I sure meant to have Durando shoot up the Square W as well. He'd have smashed that gang of gunslingin' punchers."

"Forget it," Adams said. "Halley was unlucky enough to be drinkin' in a Sweetwater saloon when the outlaws swooped. He was killed. Without a big-moneyed boss to run 'em, his remainin' hoodlums ain't gonna stick around."

From Red Nolan, Johnny learned that the Durl bullet had eventually killed Rat Face, the deputy who might easily have brought word of Marshal Vanny's death and caused swift vengeance to be exacted on the Lazy J. The three cowhands had found his body, a mile from the scene of the range gun-ruckus.

"All in all, you did a danged good job, throwin' them outlaws against Sweetwater," Bob Jensen said. "An' you kinda topped it off by savin' Joan. She was danged foolishly ridin' range alone when Olsen met up with her."

That left just one problem to be settled. Johnny Morgan settled it later, when Joan came into the room, and the three men, with grins at each other, went out.

"Jus' wanta tell you that I'm still a man after your sweet an' lovely heart," he said. "Does that mean anythin'...to you?"

"What do you think?" she smiled.

"I think you're gonna like Texas," Johnny said.

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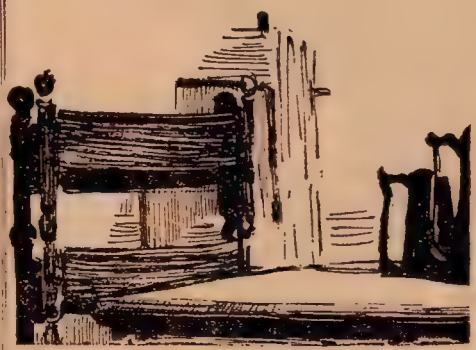

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"Murdock robbed just one stage too many, you see..."

# three bullets to death

by Robert Gene McDuffie

**Bill Jackson came out in the storm to await the man who had sworn to kill him, as soon as he got out of prison...**

IT WAS RAINING; it had been raining hard for three days. The thick black clouds rolled and rumbled over Prairie City until Bill Jackson expected the small Arizona town to float away down Deadman's Creek. Even though it was only early afternoon, the lanterns were burning in the *Prairie Saloon;* the flickering light helping a little, but not much, as the men at a nearby table squinted at the cards they were holding in their hands.

"Can't hardly cross the street," said the bartender as he began polishing the same glass for the twelfth time that day. "Business is bad. The sidewalks are covered with water in spots, and where there ain't no sidewalks there's holes—deep holes!" He held the glass up so the light would shine through it, frowned, and began polishing away a fingerprint. "You sure picked a lousy day for a gunfight!" he continued.

"Any day is a lousy day for a gunfight," replied Jackson.

Ned Jones, the bartender, nodded. A frown crossed his face and he set the glass and towel down on top of the bar. "Guess I didn't keep the wick turned down low enough. That chimney's goin' to be blacker than night in a few minutes..." He left the bar to turn down the kerosene lantern, which hung from the ceiling on a long brass chain.

Then he looked over the batwings, squinting up and down the rain-drenched street, and not seeing anyone returned to the bar. "Why don't you go home, kid?" he asked. "Chuck Murdock's probably holed up someplace... At least until the rain is over."

Jackson shook his head. "Murdock wouldn't have sent me that telegram if he didn't intend showing up."

"Never heard of anyone arranging a gunfight by telegram," said Jones. "Too bad you can't shoot at each other the same way!"

Jackson didn't answer. He cocked his head, listening intently. He thought he had heard the sound of hoofbeats

outside, but realized it was just the rain pattering on the roof and sidewalk. Why Murdock had sent him that telegram surprised him as much as it did Jones... But Murdock had an unusual way of doing things and this was one of them.

"Can't figger Murdock out," said Jones, picking up his towel and starting to polish another glass. "That's one hombre I don't really savvy... No matter how I try... I just don't savvy him. You'd think goin' to the pen for that stage holdup would teach him a lesson... But it didn't! Now he's coming back to get revenge on the passenger who identified him as the man who held up the stagecoach. If he kills you, he'll just go back to the pen and..."

"I'm not worried about myself," said Jackson. "It's Helen and the baby I'm thinking about. Helen hasn't anyone but me to take care of her, and if anything should happen to me—anything could happen to Helen and the baby!"

JONES POURED a glass of whiskey for Jackson. Bill took a quick swallow, then set the glass back on the bar and stared at it; picked the glass up and took another swallow, emptying it completely. It just seemed to him that he was having a run of bad luck all at one time. He had taken Helen into the county seat several years ago so she could have the best of medical care when the baby arrived.

He had left his ranch in the care of an Apache cowboy who earned more than the money Jackson paid him but there was too much work for a single man to do for long. He left Helen in the care of friends at the county seat, and returned home on the stagecoach; that was when Murdock stopped the stagecoach—when it reached the crest of a hill.

As Murdock rode away, the red neckerchief fell away from his face. Jackson got a glimpse of Murdock's face without the gunman realizing it. Jackson recalled how, at the trial, he was the only witness to positively identify Murdock; the balance of the evidence was based on circumstantial evidence.

His face red with rage, Murdock glared at Jackson immediately after the jury brought in a "Guilty" verdict and swore he would come back and kill him. Now he was keeping his word. He had sent a telegram to Jackson, immediately after his release from prison, which simply read: *"Meet me at the Prairie Saloon Wednesday."*

"I used to have a saloon over in Denton, Texas," said Jones. "Never saw too many, but there were gunfights now and then. But this is the first time I've ever heard of sendin' a telegram sayin' meet me at a certain place at a certain time. Most the gunfighters I saw wanted to take the other hombre by surprise... Better chance of comin' out alive!"

"Maybe he's had a change of heart," joshed one of the cowboys seated at the poker table. "Maybe he's comin' back to say he's sorry!"

His companions roared with laughter. A big smile came to Jones' face and even Bill Jackson grinned.

A flash of lightning brightly illuminated the saloon for an instant and was immediately followed by a loud rumble of thunder. Suddenly, Jackson became aware of the strange quietness which surrounded him. The rain had stopped.

"Why don't you take your wife and kid and get out of here?" asked Jones. "Let the sheriff take care of Murdock. When it's all over you can come back and no one will think any worse of you for it."

"Where would we go?" asked Jackson. "Tombstone ... Flagstaff ... he can find us there just as easy as he can here."

Jones nodded agreement. His eyes suddenly widened and his face paled as he looked beyond Jackson toward

the street. Jackson whirled, fear racing through him. He saw Murdock shove back the bat wings as he stepped into the saloon. Jackson's heart pounded heavily and sounded like Indian war drums in his ears.

Murdock was wearing a yellow slicker and his black sombrero was dripping water. He had lost his former suntan, but his white face had now become sunburned from the long horseback ride to Prairie City before the heavy rains started.

WITHOUT a word Murdock removed his slicker and hung it over the back of a chair at one of the card tables. Then he started walking slowly towards the bar. Jackson braced himself, his arms hanging by his sides—ready to draw his six-gun.

Murdock, noticing Jackson's stance, kept his hands away from his guns. He stepped up to the bar and ordered a whiskey. While he drank it he kept one eye on Jackson. Then, setting the glass on the bar he turned to Jackson and said, "Guess there's no need to ask if you're Jackson!"

"You've named me, mister," replied Bill uneasily. "I'm ready when you are!"

Murdock frowned. "Ready for what?"

Jackson didn't answer. He kept his right hand near his gun. He didn't trust Murdock.

"You've got me wrong, kid," said Murdock. "You must've misread that telegram. I didn't come back here to kill you. You should know better than that—especially when I'm inclined to believe you're faster on the draw than me!"

"Then why'd you send that telegram?"

"I want to be friends...that's all."

Jackson squinted at him suspiciously.

"While I was in the pen," said Murdock, "I got to thinkin' what a fool I was for robbin' that stage and how wrong I was. Then I got to thinkin' about how I threatened you... I'm sorry, kid. There's no hard feelings with me. I want to settle down here... be your neighbor...and friend."

"Keep talking," said Jackson.

"I've about said my say," replied Murdock. "Like I've said, I've

changed. I want to settle down and become a rancher like you. I was wrong, and I admit it. Now I want to profit by my mistakes."

Ned Jones picked up another glass and began polishing it so hard it squeaked.

Jackson found himself in a turmoil. He wanted to believe Murdock and yet—he wondered if Murdock was speaking the truth. However, since the man seemed sincere in starting anew one little unkindness or distrust might cause him to abandon his intentions of living an honest life and once more become an outlaw. He had to take a chance. He would accept Murdock as a friend and do everything possible to help him become a useful citizen.

"There's some homestead land near mine that hasn't been taken up," said Jackson. "There's plenty of water and grass. I'll help you get your cabin and barn built whenever you're ready."

A big smile crossed Murdock's face. "That sure sounds good to me," he said. "It's stopped raining. Why don't we go out now and take a look at it?"

"I ought to get home," replied Bill noticing a shaft of yellow sunlight breaking through the clouds. "Helen will be worried about me."

"The sooner we leave the better," said Murdock, putting on his slicker. "I'd like to see that land before it starts raining again. I got plans and I don't want them delayed."

The sunlight brightened and Jones, the bartender, hurried from behind the bar to extinguish his kerosene lamps. Murdock was already outside on the boardwalk. As Jones passed Jackson, the bartender shook his head slightly, then returned to the bar.

"I'll have to get my horse from the livery stable," said Jackson as he met Murdock outside.

MURDOCK untied his horse from the hitch-rack and swung into the saddle, his horse splashing through puddles of muddy water as they headed toward the North end of the street. Jackson, his boots clumping on the boardwalk, kept pace with the horse. He was careful that Murdock would stay even with him at all times, maybe just a few feet ahead of him, but never behind him.

Far away, a dog barked, otherwise the street was quiet. Prairie City evidently was going to remain a dormant town until the inhabitants were certain the rain had ceased for longer than a few minutes. A horse neighed in a gentle fashion as Jackson entered the stable.

Jackson heard the creaking of saddle leather and turned to see Murdock dismounting, a wide smile on his face.

"You sure have a beauty of a horse," said Murdock. "Maybe I can get me one like that someday!"

Jackson nodded. "Yeah," he said. "Maybe you can." He looked around for the owner of the livery stable, but there was no one else in sight—just Murdock and himself.

He placed the saddle blanket on his horse then picked up his saddle and put it on the blanket. He reached down to grab the cincha ring and at that moment had a feeling he ought to look over his shoulder—something was happening in back of him! He whirled to see Murdock only eight feet away from him, a grin of satisfaction on his face. Murdock's hand was on his gun and he was pulling it from the holster.

Murdock hadn't changed—he had meant to kill Jackson all along; only he wanted to make certain he was safe from avenging guns.

In the flash of a second Jackson flung himself to the ground behind the wooden partition of the stall, drawing his sixgun as he fell. Murdock's gun roared twice. A bullet ripped through a board several inches from Jackson's head. Another bullet grazed his left shoulder causing a burning pain.

Through a crack between the boards of the stall Jackson saw Murdock silhouetted against the sunlight. Bill

placed the barrel of his sixgun between the two boards and fired. Murdock screamed! He dropped his gun and bent double then fell face downward on the hay-strewn floor.

"Sounded like they come from the livery!" Jackson heard a man shout down the street. He holstered his gun and went to see if Murdock were still alive. Jackson turned him over. Murdock's eyes were closed and he was breathing heavily. He had been shot in the stomach.

"I knew it," said Ned Jones as he stepped into the livery. "I didn't trust him the minute he came into my place."

A crowd of curious men and women gathered at the entrance to the livery stable. A short, bald-headed man came forward with a black satchel and knelt down beside Murdock. He shook his head, hopelessly. "He won't live more than a few minutes."

Murdock, gasping for breath, slowly opened his eyes and looked up into Jackson's tense face. He tried to smile, but it was difficult for him to do so. "If it weren't for you," he said. "If it ...why did you have...to come into my life and...ruin it for me?"

"You ruined it yourself, Murdock," said Jackson, gently.

"Maybe..." agreed Murdock. "but things are goin' to be different from ...now on!" Then he closed his eyes.

"He's gone," said the doctor.

Jackson slowly stood up.

"Here," said Jones, placing his arm about Jackson's waist. "You look weak."

"I've —I've never killed a man before," said Jackson.

"He forced it on you," said Jones. "You wouldn't have killed him if he hadn't made you do it!"

Jackson nodded. *If only Murdock had really changed,* he thought. *But while some people can make a mistake and learn from the experience Murdock didn't want to. Once he picked up a grudge he never dropped it.*


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# White Man's Book

by Archie Joscelyn

**The white man's medicine was in this book with the cross-marks on its front, and Smallfoot wanted this medicine. Then he found that the only way he could use it was by working with the white men...**

SMALLFOOT, of the Sioux, had never been known to grin or laugh. Perhaps that sprang in part from his twisted, misshapen foot, a handicap which he had worked hard to overcome. Even as a youth, he had been intensely earnest, a quivering bundle of ambition and nerves. But now something close to a smile, a triumphant lightening of the features, made him appear less like a weasel than usual. This was victory.

He backed cautiously away from the sleeping white man, clutching his trophy as though fearful that the inanimate thing might miraculously whisk itself away. His tomahawk was still in the thong at his belt, unused. He had been ready to strike if necessary, but even in death a man sometimes cried out, and there were others sleeping nearby. The theft had been surprisingly easy.

At a safe distance Smallfoot broke into a run, a long, ground-covering lope. He had trained himself so that his misshapen foot no longer hampered. For an hour he held the pace, never pausing until he came to a camp of his people. There were a dozen tepees pitched near the head of a coulee, concealed by its slopes and the waving brush along the crests. At this hour, no fires burned, and the moon had slipped out of sight, so that a coyote, above, was like an imagined shadow.

It was necessary to wait for daylight before he could fully examine his prize. Smallfoot clutched the trophy, crouching sleepless through the long hours. Excitement made a strong ferment, like the white man's whiskey. This which he held was the great medicine, not alone of the one white man, but of all the whites, the secret of their wisdom, the source of their strength. Now it belonged to him. He had done what others had sought to accomplish, and failed.

The tales had spread from mouth to tribe, from tribe to tribe. Among oth-

ers, there had been the four Nez Perce, picked warriors, who had made the long journey to St. Louis, humbly requesting that they be given the white man's Book of Heaven. Smallfoot grimaced in the darkness. What foolishness, to suppose that the men of the great camp would acede to their request! The whites knew how strong their medicine was, and naturally they had guessed the real reason why the Nez Perce desired it. Not to point them to the white man's God—Smallfoot was certain that they could not have been so naive as to suppose that he would turn to being the God of the red man.

But with the white man's book, this strong medicine, they might turn it against the pale-skinned invaders and learn their magic. Then the Indian could stand against and defeat them in battle.

But the four Nez Perce had not obtained the Book; there had been palaver and promise. None of the four had returned alive to their people.

Where they had failed, he had succeeded. Three moons ago he had seen this white man, and at first Smallfoot had considered him foolish. He had a habit of wandering off alone, of opening the book and studying it. But when Smallfoot had made sure that it was The Book, he had realized that the man took no risk, possessing such strong medicine. That it was The Book Smallfoot had found by creeping close, until he could see the golden mark upon it—two lines which crossed. That was the sign of the Book of Heaven.

It had required courage, skill, stealth and much planning to accomplish, but now the book was his; its medicine belonged to him.

BY DAYLIGHT he examined it, tracing the crossed lines with his finger, awed but exultant. He leafed through the pages, fascinated by the many markings upon them, like tracks in the snow. They made many trails which crossed and recrossed, seeming to lead nowhere. Disturbingly, he realized that knowledge was not imparted by possession of the book. He had not the skill to read these tracks, to untangle the trail they made.

It had been his plan to hold fast to the book, telling no one. Now, realizing that he must have counsel, he went to The Old One, Many Sleeps. Many Sleeps could no longer take the war trail, but he was strong in counsel.

He listened, nodding portentously, examining the book and nodding again.

"It is The Book," he agreed. "Once I saw one, though not to touch it." Smallfoot detected the awe in his voice, this ancient one who had seen so much. "It is strong medicine, there is no doubt of that, and you have done a brave thing."

"Now I would use this medicine for the good of our people," Smallfoot said eagerly. "With this medicine we can stop the white men, turn their victories to defeats."

Many Sleeps shook his head.

"It is strong medicine," he repeated. "And since you possess it, it may work for you. But not against the white man. It is white man's medicine. It would never work against him."

The truth of that was so obvious that Smallfoot wondered how he could have failed to see it. But even the four Nez Perce had been blind to that, and was he wiser than they?

"But what good will it be, if it can not be used against the pale skinned ones?" he asked, and felt the screwing of his face, like that of a small boy. His disappointment was great.

"In this are many tracks, and they point a trail which only the white man can follow," Many Sleeps explained. "It must be a long trail, and surely it is not an easy one. If you could read the sign to follow it, then possibly you could turn its medicine as you would. Since that is impossible, it is still the white man's medicine. If you would use it, you must work with him, nor try to turn it against him. In that

way, you may gain its strength, even if you cannot follow the trail."

That was logic, and Smallfoot was humbly grateful for the wisdom. It meant a readjustment of his plans, a change in his whole philosophy. For most of his thirty years he had dreamed of obtaining a strong medicine, becoming a mighty war chief, and sweeping the whites from the land. To accept and work with rather than against them, was not easy.

He had tricked himself, he realized, in obtaining the white man's book. It was far too strong a medicine to cast away, now that he had it. If he held it in disdain, surely it would destroy him. Therefore, he must do as Many Sleeps advised; he must be a friend of the white men and work with them. It was the only way.

That meant accepting them, and all which their presence entailed. Still, that might not be all bad. Craftiness came to Smallfoot's eyes. There were many good things which the white man possessed, such as rifles, tobacco and whiskey. And the white maidens were fair.

His hate had strengthened at the practice of the white men, who took red maidens for themselves, doing so with impunity. There had been Fawn Who Sleeps, a dozen years before. She had smiled, shyly, when Smallfoot passed her father's tepee, and he had stared at the yellow moon as it hunted the night sky, and dreamed dreams... At that time, his boyish hatred had become a man's bitter animosity toward the whites.

But if he proved himself their friend, possessed of their medicine, might not many things be changed? Even to his taking a white maiden?

SMALLFOOT set out, the Book of Heaven encased in a pouch of fine white leather, beautifully beaded, suspended by a strap from about his neck. Having resolved upon his course, he lost no time. Always he hunted alone, and now, jealous of his medicine, he did not think of asking others to join. In any case, there was no need. Having the white man's book, how could he fail?

Two days before he had seen many wagons, crawling slowly amid the dust of their own raising; wagons which journeyed to their doom, to where the Pawnee waited. There were many warriors, and they had painted their faces.

Before he had obtained the book, Smallfoot had toyed with the notion of joining the Pawnees in common war against the whites. Now he saw that he must help those in the wagons, against the Pawnee.

Traveling with so many wagons, the immigrants probably felt secure. They did not realize how strong and crafty a force lay in wait, nor even suspect their presence.

Smallfoot was tireless, buoyed up by the feel of the book against his chest. It was good medicine, and strong. Already he had received many proofs. He saw birds against the sky, and they were a warning of a score of mounted Pawnees, among whom otherwise he must have blundered. He found sweet cold water where all water holes were dry at this season. He came upon roots easy to dig, strongly sustaining, where he dared not hunt openly.

He found where the Pawnees lurked among the hills, watching the unsuspecting wagons draw near. Three hundred warriors, magnificently mounted, many of them armed with rifles. His heart sank until, remembering the Book, he was reassured.

That night, when the wagons drew into a circle, Smallfoot lay in the grass and watched. There were thirty wagons, some sixty men, a hundred people. It was a strong train, but not strong enough to withstand what was coming—not without his aid, and the medicine of the Book of Heaven.

One maiden was young, as Fawn Who Sleeps had been, fair as the moon's white face. Her hair, braided

like an Indian maiden's and falling to her shoulders, was yellow as the stars. Beholding her, Smallfoot knew he had made the right decision.

The Pawnees were in no hurry. They had no cause for haste. Their victims were unconscious that they drove into a trap.

Smallfoot pondered the advisability of showing himself, of warning them of what lay ahead. He fingered the book, and it seemed to him that he must wait. He was a friend of the whites, but would they know it? Too often, distrustfully, they shot at sight of an Indian. If any among them were skilled enough to recognize him as a Sioux, they would know that the Sioux were enemies.

All others of the Sioux, that is. But even with the protection of the book, they might not give him time to explain. And he knew no words of their outlandish tongue.

It would be better to give warning at the proper moment, thus proving himself a friend. After they realized that he had saved them, he would be accepted.

The climbing sun was no more silent in its movement than the gathering Pawnees. At any other time, Smallfoot could have admired the skill they showed. If he was with them, with the strong medicine he carried, these whites must surely be destroyed. But the book with its many tracks did not point that way.

He saw the maiden, riding upon the seat of a wagon, and longing grew in him, such as he had not felt these dozen years. Today he must prove himself.

FOR THE first time, the book failed him. He planned to steal a pony from the Pawnees, then race toward the train, forcing their warriors to sweep in pursuit, showing themselves too soon. But a guard arose from among brush and high grass, thwarting the attempt. He sounded the alarm and discharged an arrow, and for an instant Smallfoot believed he had taken a mortal wound. The impact twisted him about, driving the breath from his body, sending him to his knees.

Then he was up and running, and the air came back to his lungs; his medicine was strong, the book was good. How good, he saw a little later. He broke down the slope of the hill, into the open, and the Pawnees pursued, shouting, shooting, until an angry command halted and pulled them back. But by then the white men had seen and heard, and their ambush was spoiled.

It was enough to save Smallfoot. Like a shadow he lost himself in one of the numberless ravines which snaked and twisted down the slopes, and within minutes he could defy the whole force of the Pawnees to search him out. Not that they were trying to do so. Vengeful as they might feel, a few incautious ones had allowed the plan to be betrayed, and now the chiefs must decide whether to attack at once or plot new strategy.

Smallfoot was able to examine the book, to make sure what had happened. The pouch which enclosed it was gashed, the book broken and torn where the flint-tipped war arrow had driven, aimed for his heart. It would surely have dipped its point deep but for the book. The force had spun him about, knocking him to his knees, driving the breath from his body, but the arrow had fallen harmlessly to the ground.

Awed, Smallfoot surveyed the evidence; here was proof that he had nothing to fear. He noted approvingly that the wagons were corraling. Alarmed, the white men were taking no chances. But now the Pawnees were preparing to attack. Even if they had lost the advantage of ambush, they were confident of their ability to overwhelm the train.

They swept out, a yelling, painted horde, charging in two long waves

down the hill, turning gradually, coming like twin arrows at opposite sides of the circle. The defenders waited until they were close, then poured a shattering volley which left many a pony riderless. The arrows blunted, swerved, forming lines which swept along either side, and now war arrows and Indian guns took toll.

It would take a while, but the superior force of the Pawnees must prevail in the end. Moreover, the whites had formed circle so hastily that there was no water in the encampment, and the sun was climbing a brazen sky.

It was up to him to aid; otherwise the train was doomed.

Under other conditions, Smallfoot would have hesitated, appalled at the prospect. But his medicine was strong. Working in conjunction with the white men, there could be no failure.

It was not hard to equip himself with a horse and rifle, as a wounded Pawnee circled back, seeking shelter.

Smallfoot burst into the open, yipping frenziedly, riding at a score of Pawnees who were poising for a fresh assault. Their surprise was great. For a moment they were paralyzed, taking no action. When, belatedly, they tried to turn and shoot, Smallfoot discharged the rifle, killing the chief. The fall of their leader threw the others into near-panic. Then he was among them, swinging the clubbed rifle, fighting like a madman. When it splintered in his grasp, he snatched his tomahawk.

IT WAS THEIR certainty that he was mad, coupled with the death of the chief, which demoralized the Pawnees. The group fled, and their panic spread. The guns from the wagons made it a rout.

Jonas Scraggs, questing with others of the train among the dead, came upon Smallfoot. He glanced casually, then looked more closely and made sure.

"Why, this must be the Indian that turned ag'in the others," he said. "Yeah, it's him, sure enough. Wonder what made him do it?"

Fancher, the guide, was uneasily aware that he had failed to sense the presence of enemies. But victory had been won, and he could importantly show his knowledge. He gave his verdict.

"Easy enough to understand," he said. "This fellow's a Sioux. The others are Pawnees. They don't get along together."

"But it was mighty funny, for one Sioux to ride out against all those Pawnees," Scraggs protested. "Here's something else. Look at this hole in his chest. That must have come from one of our bullets—one of those that you flattened at the end. It's certain the Indians didn't have any shells would tear a hole like that."

"They ain't learned that trick," Fancher boasted. "Maybe my bullet dropped this fellow. Hard to pick an' choose a target, with the fightin' as hot as it was there for a minute."

"I suppose so," Scraggs sighed. "Poor devil! He saved our bacon for us, at that. Why, what's this?" He removed the loop from about Smallfoot's neck, drew out the torn and bloody Book from the pouch. "Guess this accounts for his helpin' us. He must have been a Christian Indian."

Pursuant to that thought, it was decided to give the Sioux a burial, as though he had been a white man. Certainly he had proved a friend. Because it was unfriendly country in which to tarry, and for economy of effort, they made a common grave for Smallfoot and the single casualty among the whites—the sixteen-year-old, yellow-haired girl whose parents had died of the cholera, back at the Blue.

★

# CAPTIVE TOWN

by Bradley Burr

**Ashville trembled under the terror-inspired rule of the deadly Charlie Mord — until bartender Sorghum Jones remembered something...**

ASHVILLE was a captive. It crouched there on the bank of Old Woman Creek, a prosperous cowtown that had begun to boom with the spreads that were building out on the range. Now, one man stalked through it, domineering, beating down anything in his path, taking what he wanted—and, worst of all, laughing in their faces. That man was Charlie Mord, the famed killer of Cemetery Flats. So Ashville could do nothing. To call Mord out was as good as sticking a knife in one's own throat. He had hit the town two days before. Half an hour after his arrival, the Justice of Peace had departed on a long trek back into the hills, after some reportedly stolen cow stuff. His Honor, the Justice of the Peace, had some common sense. Most all men have a weakness for staying alive.

A humid, spasmodic wind off the sage flats, presaging a storm, had been kicking balls of tumbleweed along the main street that drowsy afternoon of the third day when Charlie Mord stomped into Whisky Jack's. He poised himself in the double doorway of the barroom, scowling around, hiking up his pearl-gray pants.

"Talking about me, huh? I bet!" he snorted, red face breaking into a grin that was a malevolent lie in itself. When Mord grinned, it meant he was at his most dangerous pitch, prodding for trouble. Trouble seemed as necessary to Charlie Mord at regular intervals as food and drink to a normal man.

Sure they had been talking about him. There were seven-eight gents strung along the bar, and two older men at a table over on the side. There was Whisky Jack, the little bug-sized white-headed proprietor, with the drink wrangler, two hundred and sixty pound limping Sorghum Jones. Ashville had talked of nobody else since the advent of Charlie Mord.

"Well, maybe nobody here don't

like me!" Mord roared, tapping his lashed-down holsters with long spatulate fingers. "Don't nobody here say 'Howdy' or 'Good-day' to me, huh?"

They answered like obedient parrots, meek, cowed. "Howdy" and "Good-day, Mr. Mord" and "How're you, Mr. Mord" came from all around. He spat on the floor. Making men lick his boots always made him feel good. Then he advanced across the big room slowly, slapping his gauntlets against one of his thick thighs. He was a six-foot brute of man but so thickly built he almost seemed stocky. Sheer animal power radiated from every inch of his thick frame, seemed to throb in him as if hungrily awaiting the chance to beat some other human critter down. The force of it was so great that men failed to notice his shoulders were actually not broad for a man his size, nor noticed that his arms were on the short side. And that his hands, though always slightly hooked as if the fingers itched to cradle a gun butt, were not the big heavy-wristed dewclaws most great trigger slammers boasted.

ONE OF HIS gloves flapped to the floor. It was deliberate. He stopped dead still, glaring at the two old-timers seated at the table. Tapping a big gleaming boot warningly. And old Mac Hobbs, breathing asthmatically, pushed himself up and retrieved the glove and offered it to Mord. Charlie Mord accepted it with a mocking bow, then gave the elderly man a push that sent him crashing back into his chair.

Behind the bar counter, Sorghum Jones sucked his breath and cursed softly. A pulse in his great meaty neck began to bounce blood against the skin so it could be seen. He thought of that .45 Colts down under the counter. But Sorghum Jones never had been a gunman. He was a great ponderous slow-moving mountain of flesh with a flour-hued face that could have been the moon smoking a cigar. Before he even had that gun cocked, Mord would have had four-five pieces of lead in him. Mord liked to pump the slugs into a man, even after he was downed.

Mord came on over to the bar slowly. Sorghum Jones nodded and said, "The usual double shot of gila juice, Mr. Mord?" The killer liked to be called "mister."

Mord said nothing, just looking around, pushing one thumb slowly up through his beard stubble. He made a practice of keeping little men awaiting his answer. It made them uneasy and set them to squirming inside, and he loved to have men squirm before him. He poked a tailor-made cigaret in his face finally and let Jones hold a match for him. Mord blew the smoke in the barkeep's face. Sorghum Jones just looked back, ignoring it, bland face a mask, wise eyes hooded by heavy lids.

Mord shifted his eyes and studied himself in the cracked mirror behind the bar. Once he had been an almost handsome man with glass-bright china-blue eyes and a high-bridged nose and long flat jaws to frame that wide vicious mouth. He'd had sleek sandy hair as well. But he'd had an accident—kicked by a horse, the story went. Up on one side of his forehead there was scar tissue running back into the scalp. Hair would not grow into it, so he looked as if he were starting to go bald on that side. The bridge of his nose had been smashed down, and his left jaw was swollen with a big permanent bump as the result of the blow, giving him a lopsided appearance.

But they had known who he was, none the less, when he blew into Asheville. Advance word of him had come from Hopkins up the creek. He had been there last week, had killed a man up there too. On top of that, at his hips spiked the white bone handles of his well-known guns, the handles

"Charlie Mord got his reputation among outlaws..."

with "J. B." burnt into them. "J. B." were the initials of the first man Charlie Mord was supposed to have dispatched to Boot Hill. There was that five-dollar gold-piece he wore hooked into his right ear like an earring. Everybody knew that that was Mord's lucky piece, that he believed he never could be killed so long as he wore it. And that jewelry drummer who used to go through Cemetery Flats regularly had recognized him on sight.

So, though Mord had suffered disfigurement, they had known him, feared him.

"WELL, WHAT the devil are you waiting for?" he suddenly roared at Sorghum Jones. "You heard what I ordered, didn't you?"

Jones smiled but not submissively or fawningly. "Mr. Mord, I'm a mite deaf, you see."

"Drinks for everybody—for me! Sabe?" He half wheeled. "Anybody here who don't want to drink with Charlie Mord?"

Nobody did want to drink with him; neither did they want a hurried claim staked for them in Boothill either. Sorghum Jones set them up. Mord dumped his down, then pulled out a fistful of bills. "How much?"

"That'll be..." Jones started.

"That's too damn much!" Mord blasted. He flung a two-bit piece on the bar top. "There!" His lips peeled back his teeth. He ached for trouble.

"I was about to say, Mr. Mord, that will be on the house—for you." Jones came back evenly, pushing back the quarter. "For a customer like you, we always buy the first drink for him and his friends." And down at the end of the bar, Whisky Jack nodded quickly.

Jones pushed a glass of water across to Mord. Charlie Mord demanded to know what that was for. Jones said:

"After your first drink of the day, you always wash out your mouth with a drink of water, Mr. Mord. I used to work over in Cemetery Flats years back, you see." He had.

"Yeah?" Mord wanted to be mad about something, but he couldn't pick a quarrel with this suave barkeep. He took a gulp, gargled it around, then spat it out on the floor. "Well, how is Devens?" he snapped.

Slats Devens, a cowhand from up at the northern tip of the valley, had dared to cross Mord the first day he'd ridden in. Mord had smashed two slugs into the poor devil before he could even clear leather. Now, Devens lay down the line in a house, hovering halfway between life and death. Somebody said he was in plumb bad shape.

"He was plumb locoed to start with, crossing me," Charlie Mord came back. Then he signed for a fresh drink. He had several, standing brooding over them.

SORGHUM JONES kept busy behind the bar, mopping up with his cloth, shifting bottles, shining a glass here, there. But from the tail of his eye, he kept watching Charlie Mord. Jones saw he had begun to put on a layer of soft fat over his beefy frame, that his hand was none too steady when he lifted his glass. And once when he slapped at a bothersome fly, he missed by inches; his eyes had been slow on timing its flight. Sorghum Jones saw a man who had a town intimidated by his reputation alone, saw a man who was beginning to slip, who could be taken if a fast man had the nerve. Jones' brain began to revolve on that kernel.

Mord cursed. He had been fumbling with buttoning the cuff of his left shirt sleeve, and the button popped off. He loosed a flood of obscenity as he half ripped the cuff from the sleeve, baring his massive forearm. Then he slammed his quirly over behind the bar, dumped down his last drink, and said he was going down to the dancehall.

"There's a skirt down there called Maizie. I aim to have some pleasure with that gal." He swaggered out.

"Gawd, did you see the muscles in that arm when he yanked up his shirt sleeve?" one of the men at the bar said with awe.

Something clicked in Sorghum Jones' brain.

JONES RAN his eyes over the man at the bar thoughtfully, appraisingly. There was one, perhaps, who could do it. That was quiet sad-faced Kazan, a stocky man in his early thirties. Kazan had been an all-fired tough deputy sheriff down in the Washita country before he had come up here to marry and settle down. But, on the other hand, he was slow-tempered. He could sling a hogleg if crowded. But to get him that way...

Then another man came in, young Luke Infors who ran the little Leaning-L outfit with his dad to the west of the town. Young Infors had been a hell-raiser before his old man had finally saddle-broke him. Didn't give a hoot. Once he'd had to leave the country for a spell after putting lead in a jasper over a girl.

"I see Mord just left the place," Infors greeted them, mocking-eyed under the sombrero he always wore at a rakish tilt. "Why ain't you gents all half-dying with laughter, huh?"

"Watch yourself, Luke," advised one of the older men. "Don't go crowding Charlie Mord. He..."

"That ain't Mord," said Sorghum Jones slowly.

It hit the place like a soundless explosion. All motion, every last little movement, was frozen for a long moment. Somebody gasped, "Wh-what?"

Jones leaned his great hulk of beef on the counter so that it creaked, let his eyes run over them solemnly. "Like ever'body knows, I worked for years in Cemetery Flats. You seen how I knowed that Mord wanted water after his first drink of the day."

"Yeah," Whisky Jack said tensely. "So I know Mord good."

"Well, he had that accident, changing his looks," said Kazan.

"Sure... But the accident didn't change his left arm. I saw it when he ripped his sleeve up."

"Well, what about it, Sorghum?"

"I was there the night in Cemetery when a Mex went haywire and hit Mord in the left arm with his knife as Mord went to draw...Charlie killed him, of course. But that knife cut a scar... And you saw no scar on this man—who calls himself Charlie Mord—on his left forearm, did you?"

There was another long moment. Then Kazan stood up tensely straight, said, "Hell, no, there was no scar! Are you sure, Sorghum?"

"You think I'm crazy or blind? Which?"

Young Luke Infors bit off a curse. "Why the snake's just a dirty tinhorn, a fake! He ain't the terrible Mord at all then!"

"An imposter, eh?" said Kazan,

tightening his gunbelt. "I reckon we oughta take some steps, gents."

IT DIDN'T take them long to get organized. Word went in swift whispers up and down the main drag. More men came into Whisky Jack's, but not to drink now. Then a picked band, with Kazan and Luke Infors marching at the van, went down the few steps to the dancehall just a little way down the other side of the road.

Mord was up on the gallery inside talking with the frizzle-headed Maizie when they walked in. He glanced over the railing at them with a smirk, started to pull the girl to him, then sensed something.

"What the hell do you pelicans want?" he threw down.

"A little parley with you, Mord—or whoever you really are," answered Kazan heavily. "And don't grab gun steel—or you'll get your chips cashed."

Charlie Mord started to guffaw. Then the sense of the words seeped into his brain. "Mord—or whoever I am? By Gawd! I'll show you two-bits!" Dragging the girl by the arm, he came unhurriedly down the stairs, smirking at them. "Now what the devil..."

"You ain't Mord!" yelled Luke Infors excitedly. "You big tinhorn!"

Charlie Mord smiled viciously, eyes buttoning up. "Mebbe I gotta convince somebody with lead..." Then half doubt hit him. He put a hand to his face. "Yeah, my looks have changed some. But don't you little rats make no mistake or I'll gun-whup a few of you half dead!"

"I'll call your bluff," said Kazan solemnly. "We know you *ain't* Mord. Sabe?"

Charlie Mord probed into the faces of the men facing him, and for once he saw no fear. They weren't awed by his lethal reputation—because they didn't think he was the hombre who owned it. He tasted fear himself then as he grabbed for a shooting iron. And those others were grabbing too, not freezing in the fatal split second of fear-born indecision as so many other men had.

Quick as a cat, Mord had the dancehall girl swung in front of him. His gun spiked out past the side of her body. Then he was backing into the hallway that ran to the rear. He heard the back door open and glimpsed men busting in. Mord threw open the door of a private room, dragged the girl in, slammed the door. He was really scared then.

"YOU CAN'T get out! The place is surrounded, Mord," Luke Infors yelled.

"Come in after me—and I'll give it to the skirt!" snarled back Mord.

There was a standoff for half a minute. The men in the front parleyed. Then Kazan called into Mord that they'd starve him out. Mord swore and bawled back that if they tried that he'd kill the girl.

"Once she's dead, you'll never get out alive!" Luke Infors raged. "You know that... They's too many of us."

Again there was a pause. Mord's voice came finally, not too certain of itself. "Let me out—and I'll quit town."

Kazan waited to confer with nobody then. His blood was up. "Mord, here's the deal!... Don't harm the girl and we'll let you come out—and I'll meet you, hands filled, out in the road!"

Mord's guffaw blasted from behind the door. "All right."

Inside of five minutes, with the town locked in an unreal stillness, Charlie Mord stepped from the front door of the dancehall. Further down the road, Luke Infors and the others blocked his escape in that direction. Up before Whisky Jack's, sober Kazan moved from behind a tree.

They were close. It didn't take them long to get into shooting range. Then the guns were stabbing, Kazan whipping his weapon up like a snake's head. A groan went up from the watchers as they saw him go reeling drunkenly over against the watering trough, then tumble, hit in the leg. But in the same moment he got it, he sent his third slug. And it caught thick-bodied Mord in the right shoulder, spinning him.

Mord swayed over to the other side of the street. He feared those others would close in behind and cut him down. He thrust himself in the narrow dim alley between Whisky Jack's and the butcher store beside it. But there in the dimness he waited. And outside they hesitated too, loathe to go in after the cornered killer...

From the window of the barroom, huge Sorghum Jones had seen. He lumbered down to the side door, let himself out in the alley. He moved up, padding silently, behind the hard-breathing groaning Mord. Jones' great arms flung around his chest, slammed down, driving the weapon from Mord's hand, his second gun. And then Sorghum Jones' hands went back up to Mord's throat...

WHEN THEY finally pushed into the alley, they found Charlie Mord dead with a broken neck. Nobody could ever understand how his neck had been broken by that bullet high in the shoulder.

Inside Whisky Jack's, before the rush to celebrate began, Whisky Jack himself spoke to Sorghum Jones. "Sorghum, you know that I too worked some time in Cemetery Flats. And I never noticed no scar on Mord's arm down there."

"No?" said Sorghum, opening a fresh bottle of redeye. "Well, some gents live by their reputation... When they lose it, they die. Charlie Mord lost his, that's all... Mebbe he never did have any scar on his arm. Sometimes I get mixed up." He put the bottle to his mouth."

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# carl, the creaser

by Harold Gluck

***Sometimes a man's general method of operation is a better clue than fingerprints!***

FOR FULLY five minutes, Jed Mahon watched the small speck on the road that was getting larger and larger. His narrow eyes were glued to the eyepieces of the army field glasses. Finally he stopped looking and handed the glasses to his partner, Carl Riedel.

"Now if we'd had these field glasses the time Sheriff Todd went after us, things might have been different," he commented. "I want you to know I did some checking up in town after we saw Bud Sigley. Know why he was willing to offer us a sure thousand dollars for this job? Old Man Benson has refused to sell his property— At least to Sigley. There's a natural spring that forms a big lake on the Benson land; if Sigley could get his hands on that property, he would control the best water supply in the county.

"But something else I don't figure. Even if we get rid of Old Man Benson, how does Sigley get hold of the land? I wouldn't trust him an inch."

"Neither would he trust us an inch," snapped back Carl Riedel. "He sent for us all the way up to Colorado. Figured we would be unknown in these parts. Paid us only half of the money. The other half we get when the job is done. That buckboard with Old Man Benson will be here soon. Just one shot and you got a perfect job. I'll crease his horse; the animal will then pull the buckboard right over the cliff."

Jed Mahon took another look through the field glasses. Something was wrong! Somebody else was seated next to Old Man Benson on the buckboard.

"There's a woman wearing a blue bonnet," he exclaimed. "That wasn't part of the deal."

"Too late now for us to quit," said Riedel as he leveled his rifle and began to take careful aim.

THE BUCKBOARD came slowly around the side of the cliff. The road had actually been hewn out of the

mountain. There was a sheer drop of about two thousand feet to the bottom. One shot rang out. The horse was stunned as a bullet went through its neck; then the wagon went out of control. The driver did his best to try to rein in the collapsing animal. The buckboard went over the cliff as the driver shouted a warning to his companion.

"Jump!"

Jed Mahon felt uncomfortable as he watched. In about an hour, the Centerville Coach would be here; the driver or his guard would surely notice something—especially the blue bonnet that was in the road. The two men climbed around the other side of the mountain, where they had left their horses, then mounted.

"We pick up the rest of the money from Mike Davis, the foreman," said Riedel. "He isn't on to the deal; thinks it refers to a sale of some cattle. Leave it to Sigley. That varmint is taking care of an alibi for himself."

AT THE VERY moment that Carl Riedel was saying those words, the owner of the LXT Ranch was seated in the office of Sheriff Jim Nelson.

"You have to do something about those rustlers," he insisted. "I'm certain it is Miguel and his boys from across the Rio Grande. They only take a few head at a time, but at the end of a year it adds up to a lot."

"You're not the only rancher who has complained," declared the sheriff. "You must remember that my legal authority is limited to this county, except when we are in pursuit of law breakers. That's why I've sent for an old friend of mine to give me a helping hand. If you turn around you will see him in the doorway."

The startled Sigley swung around and took one look at the man who had evidently been quietly listening to the conversation. He wore a long Prince Albert coat. From his hips swung two pearl handled Colt .45's.

"You can stop worrying about Miguel and his boys. Seems they ran into an Apache ambush on the other side of the border. Captain Rodriguez Martino sent for me. Believe me, the Apaches did a thorough job. They held an undying hatred for Miguel; he wantonly killed five members of their tribe several years ago."

BUD SIGLEY was worried, but his facial expression didn't show it. The three talked about various matters. Then they heard some shouting. Lou Gibbons, the deputy sheriff, rushed into the office with the news.

"Centerville Coach just came in. You know that dangerous turn in the road? Old Man Benson was driving to town in his buckboard. Had a woman with him—nice, pretty-looking gal they tell me. She was wearing a blue bonnet. The coach guard spotted it on the road, so they stopped. Believe it or not, but the woman was down only some thirty feet. With one hand she was holding on to some shrubs; with the other she supported Old Man Benson. Both are alive. Doc Donnely is out there probably by this time. And it wasn't an accident, because the gal heard a shot just before the buckboard went off the road."

It was the Prince Albert Kid who suggested that they all ride out to the scene of the accident. Bud Sigley realized he couldn't refuse; in his pocket was a forged deed of sale for the Benson land. For now, at least, it would be useless. So the three men mounted their horses and went north for almost an hour. Doc Donnely and several other men were at the scene of the accident.

"The gal only got some bruises," said one of the men. "The pluckiest female I ever saw. She saved Old Man Benson; he's her uncle. But poor Benson can't be moved yet. Both legs are broken. He's going to do a lot of resting."

THE SHERIFF took care of the introductions. He learned the name of the girl was Alice Benson. She had travelled with a wagon train going west of the Pecos River. Her uncle met her there and then brought her to his house.

"He insisted I come with him on this trip," she said. "He wanted me to meet some friends in town. Also, he had an appointment at the bank. There had been a big offer by mail and he was to be there on time. Guess he'll never make it now."

"You take care of Miss Benson," suggested the Prince Albert Kid. "Something I want to do. See you later."

The lawman rode up the mountain side slowly, looking for something. He spotted it on the ground. Then he dismounted, picked up the empty .44 shell and remounted his horse. It was quite evident that whoever had fired that shot had automatically worked the lever of the rifle, and ejected the empty cartridge. This he put into a pocket. He still had a long ride ahead.

For half an hour he went along the side of the hill. Then he cut down back to the road and slowly descended. One false step, and both horse and rider would be plunged to certain death. After what seemed like an eternity, the Prince Albert Kid reached the bottom; then rode along what had once been the bed of a river until he came to the remains of the buckboard. Then he walked to the slain horse, ran his hand along the neck and found the hole the bullet had made.

"Only an expert creaser could have done a shooting job like this. But why?" he asked himself. "Had both been killed, it would have passed as an accident. Who was there to gain by the death of Old Man Benson? Evidently they, if there were more than one in on the job, had never anticipated the girl would also be riding in the buckboard."

HE RODE slowly back to town and saw the sheriff. Something bothered him and he came right to the point. "Who would be low enough to kill a man this way?"

Then he stopped and wet his lips; something was connecting in his mind. "Looks like the work of Carl Riedel. He's one of the best shots in the country. Used to hunt mustangs that way. Crease them across the neck and put them out of action temporarily. But who would hire him?"

"Could be Bud Sigley," suggested the sheriff. "He certainly spent a lot of time here. Like giving himself a perfect alibi. He hated Old Man Benson, because he couldn't buy Benson's land. Let's ride out to the LXT ranch. We can get fresh horses at Gullow's Livery."

Carl Riedel was arguing with Bud Sigley about the balance of the money. The foreman had been told not to deliver it.

"You didn't keep your bargain," insisted the ranch owner. "Old Man Benson is alive."

"Your fault," snarled Riedel. "You never told me he had a woman with him; she saved him."

They stopped arguing when they saw the sheriff and the Prince Albert Kid approach. The lawman spoke to Carl Riedel.

"I want to check your rifle and see if it has been recently fired. I have a shell to match. Seems the hammer is a bit to the side."

Jed Mahon was to the side. He went for his six-shooter, but never made it as the alert Prince Albert Kid fired his left revolver. They took all three as prisoners. Carl Riedel talked. A week later they were all taken to the county seat.

"You got yourself three prisoners," smiled the sheriff, "And I think I may get myself a wife. That Alice is some gal!"

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# CUSTER'S LAST "GRAND-STAND"

by Clare Hamilton

***A military defeat is hard to take, at any time — but the hardest kind is the kind that was totally unnecessary. And the Battle of Little Bighorn wasn't the result of misfortune, but entirely due to one officer's stupid arrogance and determination to grab glory for himself at any cost!***

CUSTER was a "grandstanding," pig-headed sacrificer of men's lives. He has been glorified in story and film, but he never deserved it. Let's see him in the right light.

Everyone who had nothing much to do wrote a laudatory, full-length biography of him, including himself and his wife, but there might have been a little personal bias in those.

He made a "last stand" all right, and he died with his boots on. That he had every right to do, if he wanted it that way, or was stupid enough to let it happen. But he had charge of other lives, too, and he threw those away regardless. Nothing can get round the facts. And he did it in a fit of pique and pig-headedness.

He wasn't a bad-looking man, although his heavy dragoon moustache could not hide the conceited bottom lip. His long, golden hair fell almost to his shoulders. He had a bony nose and deep-set eyes which were as restless as his sinuous and muscular body. He was born in Ohio, U.S., in 1839, and by 1876, when he was thirty-seven, he had made sure that his face was known all over America. He was a limelighter de luxe and was famous for his dashing—and often extremely foolish—soldiery.

You couldn't say that he didn't have guts, but it must be remembered that every time he did some dashing act, it was in full view and the main thought in his mind was, *"This is going to look fine in the newspapers!"*

It is a remarkable thing how conceit can make a man brave. Some of the world's greatest cowards have been so afraid of a loss of face that they have blanked their minds to danger and stepped into the very jaws of death. They had no real moral courage at the final weigh-in; their conceit just made them afraid of showing their fear. In my opinion, George Armstrong Custer was one of those men.

He was trained for the army, graduating from West Point in 1861, so he

was more or less forced to confine his limelighting to soldiering, the only business he knew. Immediately after graduation, they slapped him straight into battle, as he joined his regiment just in time to be in the first battle of Bull Run. Later, on the staff of General Kearney, he got his first chance to limelight, making a daringly foolish reconnaissance on the Chickahiminy River. The publicity brought him to the notice of General McClellan who, taking him for no more than a brave soldier, attached Custer to his staff.

There was another Custer, by the way—George's brother, Tom. But you never hear anything of Tom in the movies or romantic novels, unless it is a mere mention. Tom was quiet and unassuming. And—without a doubt—brave, as he won two Congressional Medals of Honor. But he was no limelighter, so is forgotten.

GENERAL McCLELLAN made more than one mistake; in fact, he was relieved of his command. Custer was sent back to his regiment. He kept himself in the official eye and got promotions; he made a great splash at the head of the Michigan Cavalry Brigade (where everyone could see him) in the battle of Gettysburg. He kept on, always in the limelight, through campaign after campaign. He led a division in a brilliant cavalry action at the battle of Woodstock and took a most "conspicuous" part in the decisive battle of Cedar Creek.

In 1865 he accompanied Sheridan on his last great cavalry raid, helped to win the battle of Waynesboro, was again conspicuous at Five Forks, and led the final cavalry charge at Appomattox Court House. His conceit had made him emerge from the Civil War as one of its most brilliant cavalry leaders.

His ego was outsize now and he was a little difficult to control. To offer him a small command would be like asking an inflated movie star to play an extra.

In 1866 he became lieutenant-colonel of the famous Seventh US Cavalry. They really knew their hosses, Injuns and hoglegs, those boys!

CUSTER was always tense and aggressive. While with the Seventh he wrote articles about the West for New York magazines, and the style of them tells more of the man who wrote them than anything else. He took newspaper reporters on his battles! He was like a small boy in his eagerness for praise. His wife, Elizabeth Bacon Custer, whom he called "Libby," always treated him like an adored child. She calmed his fretful nerviness, and called him "Autie." Don't ask me why.

Custer was the poorest scholar and the least disciplined member of his class at West Point. He never did become disciplined. He had a bony jaw, and his deep-set blue eyes were always seeking attention, while his mind was always seeking for some audacious act to bring that attention.

He was ordered, with the Seventh, to Kansas, to take part, under General Hancock, in an expedition against the Cheyenne Indians. They finished off the Cheyennes at Washit River in November, 1868. During the next five years Custer, with much sweated blood, wrote his *"My Life on the Plains."* It was typical of the man that he would use the word "My" in the title.

What was left of the Cheyenne joined with the Sioux, and they began to start a little rebellion on their own. The War Department was handed the job of pacifying them. The Commander-in-Chief, Sherman, gave the job to General Terry. Terry considered Custer one of the best Indian campaigners in the game, so called for him and the Seventh. But Custer's ego had got him into some strife. A man named Belknap, the Secretary of War, got in-

volved in a graft charge. Custer had promised, as a good way to get limelight, to testify in the case. Congress called on him to do so, just as he was getting his regiment in readiness for a campaign which should bring him lots of publicity. He tried to call off testifying, but the authorities said no, and Custer had to go to Washington, just because he couldn't keep his mouth shut.

This held up the campaign for months. Custer got up in court and said that Belknap was a scoundrel. Belknap was President Grant's friend! And it was rather unusual for a lieutenant-colonel to testify against the Secretary of War! It might be bad business, but it was good limelighting!

ALL PLANS were made on how the Sioux would be driven into a pocket and wiped out. Custer was held at Washington. He saw it likely that his regiment would go into battle without him. He appealed to Sherman, who referred him to the President, who refused to see him! They'd give him ego and talking out of turn!

He gave it up and started for the West, without orders. Sherman sent a telegram to Terry. Part of it said: *"Please intercept him at Chicago or St. Paul and order him to halt and wait for further orders. Meanwhile, let the expedition from Fort Lincoln proceed without him."* He had been stripped of his command!

This must have been tough for Custer. It would hurt any man, but one with an ego like his... Custer was shorn of his audacity; humbled. He placed himself in the hands of Terry. Terry, a kind man, who liked Custer, pointed out that he could not disobey the orders of his superiors; that was a lesson he had learned, even if Custer hadn't. Yet he wrote to General Sheridan, the divisional commander, pointing out Custer's great value as a fighter. Sheridan passed the letter on and in his endorsement mentioned: *"On a previous occasion in 1868, I asked executive clemency for Colonel Custer, to enable him to accompany his regiment against the Indians, and I sincerely hope that, if granted this time, it may have sufficient effect to prevent him from again attempting to throw discredit upon his profession and his brother officers."*

Later a reply came back from Sherman: *"The President sends me word that, if you want General Custer along, he withdraws his objections. Advise Custer to be prudent, not to take any newspapermen, who always make mischief, and to abstain from personalities in the future."*

Custer whooped with joy, not knowing it was his death warrant. He had been slightly disrated, as Terry took over command, but, as he confided to a friend, he had no intention of staying under Terry's command on the battlefield. He would work on his own! It was going to be the Seventh, in command of General Custer, who would get all the glory of this campaign! That would be a slap in the eye for President Grant! See if he could push around a popular hero!

To detail all the campaign of 1876 would be to use up far more space than is available here.

Custer and the Seventh became the advance guard of the force under Terry. Other generals were pushing the Sioux from all sides towards one spot, at the junction of the Big Horn River and Little Big Horn River in Montana. Every available man from Forts Smith, Lincoln, Kearney, Tullock, Ellis, Reno and Rice was being used in this fight. Forts Sully and Randall in Dakota were left manned to keep an eye on the Cheyenne.

The plan of campaign was simple. When the Indians were concentrated, Generals Reno and Custer were to ride boldly forward as though into the mouth of a trap. They were to open battle and attempt, presumably, to drive the Indians back to the moun-

tains, knowing they would sweep around in an attempt to surround the attackers. But there they would meet two flanking armies— General Crook would come in from the north and Terry from the south, catching the Indians in a three-legged nut-cracker.

CRAZY HORSE had encamped his village on the upper end of the Powder River, and it was Terry's idea to catch him there before he started out for the rendezvous. He chose Crook's regiment for this job and for that reason they had to start early so that they could fight Crazy Horse and be back across country for the battle by the Little Big Horn River.

Crook's regiment struck blizzard after blizzard. He was worried. He hadn't liked Custer's mood. The arrangement had been that when Custer got into position, he would send scouts up and down river to Terry and Crook. These would bring word back to Custer that the flanking armies were in position and that he could move into action. His orders were strict that he must not open the fighting before Terry and Crook were ready.

Custer had no stomach for waiting; he had a contempt for the fighting prowess of the Indians; he badly needed all the limelight. He was in place on June 25; the flanking armies were due on June 26. Custer decided to clean up these Indians himself! What a hero he would be! His past misdemeanors would be forgotten. So he did not wait; he divided his regiment into three parties and went into action with about eight hundred men.

They met the full force of the Indians! The remnants of the flanking parties hung on until Terry came up, but in the meantime Custer and 264 men of the center column, who had ridden into the midst of the enemy, had been entirely obliterated!

Were those 264 men killed by the Indians—or Custer's conceit?

It would be interesting to know what they thought about Custer's last grand-stand in the limelight!

★

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# Blood On The Ground

by Olin Grant

*Sally was a western girl, but she'd been back East too long. Now, like a virtual tenderfoot, she was lost in the Rockies, in a snowstorm.*

THE HOWLING wind threw the sleet in Sally's face. She peered through the frozen rain in an attempt to identify the snow-clad country around her. The whiteness made identification impossible. She was lost. She had to admit it. She was lost in the Rockies in a snowstorm.

She lifted her head and shouted; there was a feeble chance that the wind would carry her voice to the ears of some other soul in this waste of cold. She stood in a hollow beside the river. She could follow the stream—if she knew whether to go up or down. She felt like a tenderfoot, for she had spent the last five years at school in the east and now, at eighteen, she felt more Eastern than Western. She told herself she had been a fool to take a lone tramp in the snow, but the sun had been shining then, before this wind had come—bringing rain and sleet and blinding her to her direction. Now it had started to snow. She walked up and down the river bank to keep her blood in circulation. She was very hungry and she had no food.

Her father would be worried; he would have set out from the ranch, for night was coming down; he would have search parties scouring the country, but to find her would be almost a miracle.

She shouted again, at the top of her lungs. She listened, but the only reply was the howling of the wind in the pines. She thought of timber wolves, ravenous for food; she called again—frantically, hopelessly.

Her heart jumped. Had she heard a human voice? She pushed back her hood and shouted again.

A reply came. It was faint, but it was a human voice—broken by the wind. She continued to shout and the voice continued to reply, getting slowly nearer. She pulled up her hood and peered through the swirling snowflakes.

At last she saw, as through a mist, the owner of the voice. He was a young man in a short, heavy coat, a sombrero, moleskin trousers and high

riding boots. As he came closer, into the teeth of the wind, he paused to wipe the snow from his face and she saw that he was handsome and about twenty. His face seemed familiar.

As he came on he stared at her, and for a moment he did not know her. He noted that she was pretty—and remembered. He came into the hollow.

"Yo're Sally Marsden?" he asked.

"Yes. Who are you?"

"I'm Jack Wilson, of the X Bar K, yore neighbor. We used to play together as kids."

She smiled at him, remembering. He had grown into quite a large young man. She knew he had not left his father's ranch and had obtained his schooling locally.

"I remember, Jack," she said. "Have you got anything to eat?"

"Not a crumb. How come yo're out in this?"

"I thought I'd take a walk in the snow, and I lost myself. Not much of a Westerner, am I? Do you know where we are?"

"Shore," said Jack with a grin. "We're on our range. Yo're a trespasser. I was ridin' around to see if any of our calves might be snowed under, when my hoss put a hoof wrong, slipped on the ice and come down. He broke his leg, poor old Winner. I couldn't leave him to freeze, so I had to shoot him."

His eyes clouded and he paused for a moment. "I cached my saddle so I could travel light, and started out for home on shanks' pony. All I'm totin' is my rifle, but it might get us some food."

"How far are we from my home?"

"Nigh on ten mile. And about the same from mine. Too far to travel in this, in the dark. But thar's a cabin about five miles away. Old Rupe Carson lives thar and he'll give us shelter and food. I guess yo're hungry. I'm purty empty myself. Wal, let's knock along afore it gets too dark."

They started off up the slope and into the teeth of the wind. She stumbled and he grasped her arm. Even in this white blankness he seemed to know exactly where he was going. She shuddered to think how she would have passed the night if he had not come along.

DARKNESS came down; a darkness like a thick black curtain resting on the white. The sky was hidden by heavy clouds and there was soon not even a glow from the snow. She knew it was underfoot; she felt the flakes on her face, but she could no longer see it. The cold bit into her bones; her hunger was an agony, and she was weary. Jack kept a grip on her. He knew the ground so well that he hardly needed to see. He guided her past trees and ice-covered rocks, kept her out of snowdrifts and they moved steadily forward. But it was not steady walking; it was plunging and ploughing, and far from fast. Her steps were slowing and he seemed to be slackening, too.

After three hours she was keeping on by sheer determination.

"You said it was only five miles," she panted.

"Yep. We done about four. We'll mebbe reach the cabin afore another hour. It's downhill now."

"How long can one live without food?"

"No need to think about that. We'll last long enough. The greatest danger is the cold. That's why we gotta keep movin'."

She felt drowsy. She wanted to sleep, but she knew that would be fatal. She started to talk, to keep herself awake. She told Jack Wilson all about school and her life in the East, and how glad she was to be back among her own people.

Her voice trailed off and after a time, as she staggered on, she became unconscious of time, unconscious of feeling. She could no longer feel the cowboy's tight grip just above her elbow, but she knew it was there, for it saved her many times from falling or

bumping into trees. She was numb. Hunger had gone; even weariness was a distant thing. She moved on automatically; without thought.

Jack realized her feelings and did not talk. He knew she was out on her feet, and there was a certain amount of relaxation in that. He was feeling the strain himself, for his usual means of transit was on horseback. He had to force himself to stay awake.

The snow ceased, but the girl did not notice it. She let her mind relax as though frozen. The wind had dropped and a great silence had descended on the land. It was broken once by the howl of a timber wolf, but even that did not worry her.

She realized hazily that Jack had begun to talk. She forced herself to concentrate on his words. He was saying something about it not being far now. She opened her eyes. They had left the trees and were walking in the open. There was a dim light, so the clouds must be scudding away. . . something bumped against her shoulder. She felt for it. It was the side of a doorway.

"Queer!" Jack was saying. "Old Rupe musta left his door open. In this weather! Let's go in. Here, Sally, you lean against the wall while I light a match. The fire is almost out."

Sally leaned against the logs and rubbed her gloved hands on her face. Ice crackled under her fingers. She forced her eyes open again. A match flickered and cast a glow of light.

Sally stared down into the face of a dead man!

FOR A MOMENT the sight made no impact on her brain. She heard Jack exclaim, and she saw him move across to the lamp on the table. The light grew. Slowly it dawned on Sally that a man was stretched out on the floor and that he was dead. Jack threw an armful of kindling upon the fire and stirred it into flame. He walked back and dropped on one knee beside the body.

"Old Rupe Carson," he said. "Shot in the chest!"

He closed the door and led Sally to a chair several feet back from the crackling fire.

"Don't take off yore things till yo're warm," he said. "Let me rub yore hands."

His brisk rubbing and the warmth of the fire began to thaw her brain into full life again.

"Has that man been murdered?" she asked.

"It looks like it. He was a nice old jigger, too."

"Who would want to kill him?"

"I been wonderin'," said Jack, as he moved around the cabin. "He wouldn't have any money, but he might have a few pelts. Yep, here they are. So it wasn't robbery. Wal, I'd better rustle up some food. I'll put Rupe in the storeroom."

She did not look around, but she could hear Jack dragging the body into the small storeroom attached to the cabin. The discovery of the body had knocked from her mind the urge to sleep. As she warmed, her hunger came back with doubled force. By the fittings of the cabin, Carson must have been a trapper and he should have some fresh meat.

It was some minutes before Jack came back to her. His face was serious.

"You had better get off yore boots," he said, "Rub yore feet. I'll have to go out."

She stared at him. "Go out? And leave me here with a dead man!"

"A dead man won't hurt you," he said logically, "and we'll both be dead if we don't get some chuck." He frowned at the fire. "You see, whoever killed old Rupe took every bit o' food in the place. I'll heat some water. It's not very substantial, but it'll warm us and take away some o' the pangs o' hunger."

Sally saw that he was worried. He did not want to leave her alone, but he must hunt food. She tried to cheer him.

"Nothing I like so much as a hot,

strong brew of water," she said. "Is there any particular flavor you prefer?"

HE GRINNED at her and his brow cleared a trifle. He was glad she was taking it like this. He filled a pot with water and set it on the fire. She left off rubbing her feet to get two battered tin pannikins.

They were soon sipping the hot water.

"I wonder if it could have been Ned Davis?" mused Jack.

"Who's Ned Davis?"

"They were talkin' about him to home afore I left. A bad critter, who shot up a couple o' men in town and hitched out, with a posse after him. They naturally thought he had gone the other way; no one would expect a man to make for the mountains in this weather. Mebbe he guessed that, so hightailed this way. He'd need food. He musta come on this cabin, killed old Rupe and cleaned out his chuck."

"He might still be about."

"That's not likely. He would be ridin' high, wide and handsome, to put as much territ'ry as possible between himself and the posse. Yo're not scairt, are you? You used to be the most darin' kid of all."

"No, I'm not scared. But I would like a gun."

"The killer took those, too—Rupe's old scattergun and his six-gun. I got this rifle, but I'll need it to shoot us some food. You'll be all right. Wal, the sooner I'm gone, the sooner I'll be back. See you later."

He picked up his rifle and went out, closing the door behind him. She went to the little window and brushed the steam from the glass. It was now a fine, clear night, with deep snow. The moon shone on Jack as he sloshed through up to his knees, making for the timber up the slope. It would be hard to find game in this weather.

She went back to the fire and poured herself another cup of hot water... She dozed. The cabin had become very warm... She came to full wakefulness when she heard the door creak. She looked toward it, drew in her breath sharply, and stood up.

A man stood there; a man she had never seen before. He was tall and brawny; his eyes were small and mean, and he wore a thick, red beard. Over his left arm he carried a saddle and saddlebags, with the bridle trailing; in his right hand he held a six-gun!

FOR A MOMENT they stared at each other. She realized he must be the outlaw, Ned Davis. She noticed the bulging saddlebags and suspected they were crammed with Carson's stores. This was Carson's killer! And she was alone with him!

His eyes flicked over the cabin.

"How did you git here?" he rasped. "By hoss?"

"No," she said, trying to keep her voice steady. "I was lost. A man and I came here for shelter."

"Where is he?"

"Outside."

Ned moved away from the door and turned so he could cover it and the girl. "I want a hoss!" he said doggedly.

"I want food," said Sally, and filled her pannikin from the pot. "I've got nothing but hot water."

He stepped closer to her. "Lissen, gal!" he said. "I'm a des-prit man and I want a hoss. If you know what's good fer you, you'll tell me where to git one, pronto! When my hoss went down, I made it back fer this cabin, and see the light and the chimney smokin'. You wouldn't be out in this weather on foot; you gotta have a hoss. It ain't round the back; you got it hid somewhars. Now you tell me or I'll..."

He was closer now. Sally suddenly emptied her pannikin of hot water in his face. It struck his half-frozen skin with a hiss, half-blinding him and making him yell with agony. He fired blindly, staggering back. Sally dived for his legs, grabbed his ankles and jerked. He went over backwards, his arms wide—flinging the saddle and

bags in one direction and the gun in another.

Sally dived for the gun. She moved with the swift courage of desperation, for she knew that Ned meant to kill her, whether he got a horse or not.

Now she had the gun and she swung swiftly, holding the four pounds of steel in both hands, her right thumb easing back the hammer. He would have another gun.

But Ned Davis lay where he had fallen, his head beside the packing case which Rupe had used for an extra chair. A little trickle of blood was spreading beneath the outlaw's head.

Sally advanced cautiously. Ned seemed unconscious. He had fallen heavily and struck his head hard. She must take his six-gun, truss him up and make him harmless before he regained his senses.

She was looking round for rope when she heard Jack's voice. It was a frantic voice, shouting "Sally!" and getting closer as he scrambled through the snow.

Sally went to the door and he saw her outlined against the light.

"Gawsh!" he panted with relief. "I thought I heard shots!"

"You did!" said Sally, and she clung to him as he reached the door. "There's Ned Davis. You'd better rope him. He brought back the food!"

She handed Jack the six-gun. She felt very weak now, but not at all unhappy.

THE END


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*Lee Winters' Story*

by Lon Williams

# by inch of candle

**Deputy Marshal Lee Winters wondered if his strange dream was in any way prophetic. If it was, he had to calm himself, and be ready to shoot fast and straight!**

AN UNUSUAL bell had been ringing somewhere in Forlorn Gap's night-shrouded, ghostly streets. Deputy Marshal Lee Winters, duty-conscious even in sleep, awoke and listened. No bell was ringing now, but he heard a strange, high-pitched voice. Distantly and eerily it cried, "Two o'clock by morning time. All's well. But beware of chidnapers of Timsy."

His awakening at first had been hazy. Now, completely alert, he listened and waited for that weird, out-of-time voice to repeat itself. His wife Myra was sleeping quietly at his side. When silence continued unbroken, he decided he had merely dreamed. Myra, according to her persistent and happy inclination, had been reading to him recently from an old book of English history. Centuries ago, according to her book, there had been spooky officials called watchmen who went

about in towns ringing bells and calling hours of night.

Yet...was it a dream he'd experienced? It seemed to him that he had heard distinctly. There had, he believed, been a bell. He had awakened to its sound. Then, awake, he had heard a nightwatchman's alarming cry, *But beware of chidnapers of Timsy.* Those words set him to thinking. Worrying, too. His translation, based upon recollection of Myra's reading, depressed and frightened him. That translation was, *Beware of kidnappers of Thames-side. Or, Beware of child-stealers beside Thames River.* This in his mind could have meant but one thing—he had heard a night-watchman of olden times making his rounds on dark streets of London.

His conclusion, from every reasonable viewpoint, was of course an absurdity. With determination he put it out of his mind and went back to sleep.

But once more he was roused by a ringing bell. Once more he heard that eerie voice, "Three o'clock by morning time. All's well. But beware of chidnapers of Timsy."

This time, convinced that he had not been dreaming, he got out of bed, dressed, and went quietly downstairs, his six-gun and gunbelt attached reassuringly. He and Myra lived in a neat white cottage near Forlorn Gap's western fringe. He recalled uneasily that he had married himself into this cozy place shortly after Myra had been made a widow by one of Forlorn Gap's endless procession of loonies and murderers. A porch ran across its front and faced a dusty road which ran westward to Elkhorn Pass.

Lee went out and stood there, listening. He perspired nervously, but he heard no bell or voice. Forlorn Gap, once a roaring gold-rush community, but a semi-ghost town now, lay silent under an overhead halfmoon. As far as he could see, nothing stirred.

"Be-confound!" he muttered to himself.

AT BREAKFAST, he caught his beautiful wife peering at him anxiously over her coffee cup.

She said, "Lee, are you ill, or something?"

"Yeah," he answered. "Not ill, but something."

"I thought so. Did you have a bad dream?"

"I suppose you could call it that." He regarded her hesitantly, but finally summoned enough nerve to ask a question. "What was it those old London nightwatchmen said when they mentioned Thames River-side?"

"Well," said Myra positively, "you can bet it was anything but that."

"What was it then?"

She studied. "Certainly they wouldn't have said Thames-side. If that was what they meant, they would likely have called it Timsy."

"Was there something in that old book you read last night about kidnappers of Timsy?"

"There may have been. I was beginning to get sleepy while I read about kidnappers. Oh, yes, I do remember. During a very bad epidemic of child-stealing, that was what nightwatchmen in London said at all hours of night. They'd ring their bells, tell what time it was, then scream, *Orl's well. But beware of chidnapers of Timsy.* Lee, why do you ask?"

Winters replied dryly, "I reckon I must've had it on my mind."

"Yes," Myra responded, eyeing him curiously, "I reckon you must have."

Soon after breakfast he saddled his big horse Cannon Ball and rode into town. His first stop was at Doc Bogannon's saloon.

BOGANNON, a large, distinguished-looking individual and man of mystery, was putting on a clean apron preparatory to commencement of his day of uncertain fortunes. He turned

with quick interest, then pleasure as his batwings swung in and a lean, wiry visitor wearing a deputy marshal's badge strode in.

"Winters! Come in, Winters!"

Lee tramped up to Bogie's bar and lifted one eyebrow. "Any mail for me, Doc?"

Bogie reached up to a shelf behind his bar. "Yes, sir, Winters, you have a letter. Judging from its handwriting, I'd say it's from your good friend Marshal Hugo Landers of Brazerville."

Winters took it, glanced at its impossible scribbling, and sniffed in disgust. "Hugo must've done this one while having a fight." He tore into it and spread down a crumpled piece of paper. Slowly he read aloud.

*Dear Winters: Wanted dead or alive a murderng kidnapper named Oswin Jarrow. About thirty. Long black whiskers. He is a Demilung. You may find him with a colony of Demilungs, somewhere west of Pangborn Road. Yours truly, Hugo Landers, Marshal.*

Winters put his letter away and jerked a thumb toward a table. "Doc, have some wine with me."

"With pleasure," said Bogie. When they were seated, he looked at Winters curiously. "You seem uncommonly disturbed by that letter, Winters."

Lee thoughtfully sipped his wine. "Doc, did you sleep well last night?"

"Perfectly."

"And you didn't hear anybody ringing a bell?"

Bogie lifted his massive eyebrows in surprise. "Bell? What kind of bell?"

"Did you hear *any* kind of bell?"

Bogie grinned. "No, Winters, I didn't. But I'm interested."

"Did you hear anybody shouting like an old-time nightwatchman?"

Bogie gave Lee a worried look. "No, Winters. Should I have heard somebody shouting?"

Winters sleeved his forehead. "Are you a heavy sleeper, Doc?"

"Well, yes. But my beautiful Shoshone is not. She could hear a trotting horse two miles away. A bell? Certainly she would have heard a bell. At breakfast she said nothing about a bell. Had she heard one, she would have mentioned it, of course. And this nightwatchman, what was he saying?"

Lee drained his glass and backhanded his mustache. "I reckon it was something I dreamed." He took out his letter and read to himself. After puzzled moments, he said, "Doc, what do you know about Demilungs?"

Bogie refilled their glasses. "Now there's a puzzler, Winters. What do you yourself know about Demilungs?"

"What I know about Demilungs is rumors. I've yet to see one."

Bogie wrinkled his forehead in deep study. "Demilung," he mused. "Interesting word. Demi... Now, sir, that's a word or prefix which means half. But half of what? Demilung. Half of a lung? Hardly. I tell you what, Winters, this word probably has got corrupted by usage. My guess is that its correct form is *Demilune,* which would mean half-crazy."

WINTERS began to see light. "I reckon that could be it, Doc. My pa used to say something or other about Demilungs. My Granpap Winters knowed about 'em back in Eastern mountains. They had their hideouts. Rumor was that no stranger ever went into their colony and got out alive. Demilungs. Yes, sir." Winters drank sparingly and shook his head. "Doc, you won't believe this, but according to my granpap those Demilungs had in their veins blood from every race of people that's ever lived on this earth from Adam down to now."

Bogie shook his head. "No!"

"Yes, sir," said Winters in a vein which his wife would have called facetious. "They're a kind of gypsy color. Oswin Jarrow, kidnapper. That fits. It's said that when these Demilungs

begin to look too much like dark-fired tobacco they slip out and kidnap a few fair-skinned women. When their color begins to show too much like tobacco ground-leaves, they steal some dark-skinned women." Winters eyed Bogie coolly and added, "Like beautiful Shoshones, for instance."

Bogie stiffened. "Winters, you can't mean all this nonsense."

"I'm only repeating what I've heard, Doc. But I make this allowance. My wife has read so much to me from old books that I have trouble keeping facts separated from what ain't facts. That bell I heard ringing last night shows what I mean. As certain as I'm sitting here I heard a bell, one of those handbells like night-watchmen of old London used as they made their rounds. That's not all. Twice I heard him screeching like a ghost. Once he said, *Two o'clock by morning time.* Later he said, *Three o'clock by morning time.* Each time he added, *All's well. But beware of child-napers of Timsy.* Can you put that in good English, Doc?"

Bogie was sweating profusely. "Of course, Winters," he said absently. "Your ghost was saying, *Beware of kidnappers of Thames-side.*" Bogie shook his head vigorously. "But I refuse to believe in ghosts. I refuse to be disturbed by warnings from a ghost. Granting that you heard such warning, of course."

Winters got up and put down a coin. "I won't argue about what can't be proved or disproved. Good-day, Doc."

He went out and rode northward.

FEW TRAVELERS were to be seen on Pangborn Road, nor indeed many human beings of any description. After five or six miles, he did meet a couple of freight wagons, each drawn by four mules and occupied by a driver and a guard, men who looked tough enough to eat raw meat, but without a black beard in sight.

He signaled for a stop and two pairs of brakes scraped harshly. Drivers pulled back on their lines.

"What is it, Officer?" a gun-guard asked without either anger or friendliness.

Winters replied in like mood, "I want to ask a question. Any of you men ever hear of people called Demilungs?"

Four scrubby faces twisted in thought. Four men shook their heads.

One asked, "What are they supposed to be like?"

"Never did see one," said Winters, "but I hear they wear long black beards and have got a setlement somewhere in this mountain country. In color they're sort of like dark-fired tobacco."

"Not Injuns, are they?"

"No."

"Nor gypsies?"

"Nope."

A driver leaned over and spat. "Sort of strikes a memory with me. Back in Tennessee where I was raised there was a settlement in some mountain valley. A queer kind of people. It was said to be a place you stayed away from, if you wanted to live. Maybe *they* was Demilungs?"

"No doubt," said Winters. "My granpap knowed about 'em. But I'm looking for Demilungs who live in these parts. Got important business with one named Oswin Jarrow. Ever hear of him?"

"Nope," they all said.

"Thanks anyhow," said Winters. "Good-day."

Whips cracked and mules tightened their traces. Winters and wagons moved in opposite directions.

He had already passed a road which led off to his right toward Pedigo Ranch, also one on his left which led into Wildcat Gulch. Farther along he came to a lefthand road which led into rugged mountains and over a place called Renwick Notch. Being familiar with those turnoffs, he passed them.

Demilungland had to be somewhere else.

Several miles north of Goat Head Pass he came to a deep, shadowy canyon which led westward. No wagon tracks led off there, but he saw hoof tracks. Promptly he pulled out of Pangborn Road and halted to investigate these hoof prints.

INSTINCT or some other influence which experience had taught him to treat with respect warned him, however, to go no farther. Possibly no such place as Demilungland existed anywhere. But if it did, it was not a place he wanted to go to. While in a state of worried uncertainty he looked at his watch and discovered that time for lunch had arrived.

This gave him a valid reason for riding inward a short distance and dismounting to build a fire.

While Cannon Ball nibbled at scattered tufts of grass, Lee broiled strips of bacon and had a quick meal of meat and biscuits. With his hat in his left hand, he was kicking dirt over his spent fire when a small object hissed past his head, caused his scalp to tingle and feel hot and his brain to throb painfully. An instant later when a rifle report echoed around him, he realized he'd been shot at.

He didn't wait for a second shot, nor did he try to locate his assailant. In no time he was riding out of there and glad to be gone.

As afternoon dragged on he continued his indifferent northward ride. Canyons and gulches led off to right and left, but he felt sure that none of them led to Demilungland. That feeling increased to positive knowledge. In fact, he convinced himself that no such place existed.

Then he met a lone rider who was headed south on a fine red horse. Both men pulled up sharply. Instantly Winters knew he had seen this rider somewhere before. He was young, not long past twenty. He was beardless and dark, with black eyes and a facial expression as mean as that of a wolf.

"Well, Officer Winters, you almost remember me, don't you?"

"I don't think I could ever forget you," Winters replied. Here was a character he'd met during his early days in Forlorn Gap, a young scoundrel called Gibber Inside. Gold-diggers who preferred nicknames called him Gibbergab. Some called him Inside-out. But by any name, Winters knew him as treacherous and without moral principles. Winters said, "I've been expecting it to happen, but so far you've never been on any of my lists of wanted monkeys."

Gibbergab's lips spread into an insolent smile. "You don't need to let that be your excuse? Folks used to call you Cat-quick Winters. I'm pretty fast with a gun myself. Want to draw with me?"

Winters looked at Gibbergab's formidable sidegun and shook his head. "I don't play games like that."

"Well, well," Gibber said sneeringly. "You used to be right nosy about other people's business. Haven't reformed, have you? Or maybe lost your nerve?"

"I'm still nosy about other people's business," said Winters. "Is there a reason why I ought to be interested in yours?"

Inside relaxed slightly. "Well, not right now, Winters. It just happens this is one of my good-behaving days. Truth is, I'm on my way to get me a woman. I've struck it rich up in this gold country. With this gun of mine, I've been able to keep my diggings. What's more, I've decided I ought to settle down and live civilized. There's a stagecoach due along here in a few hours. I'm heading down to meet it. My girl is going to be on it, and she's going to marry me."

Winters had a sweaty feeling suddenly. Without waiting to give thought to his question, he asked, "Is she dark or fair?"

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Gibbergab gave him a quick, hard look. "What's that got to do with it?"

WINTERS became cautious. He was thinking of Demilungs who were rumored to go out and steal fair-skinned women when Demilungs as a colony began to look like dark-fired tobacco. This Gibbergab was near that color. Winters said with a show of indifference, "Maybe nothing. Just happened to ask. Who is your girl?"

"If it's any of your business, which it's not," said Gibber, "my girl is Alicia Singer. She and her folks used to live in Forlorn Gap. They went back East. But me and Alicia didn't forget. She's coming back to marry me."

Winters felt both cold and sweaty. He remembered Alicia Singer, a child he'd often befriended. She had been as fair-skinned as any girl he'd ever seen, a pretty curly-headed blonde with hair like silver.

"I remember her," Winters said. He studied Gibber's hard face, imagined how it would have looked with long black whiskers hanging from it. He remembered Marshal Hugo's description of Oswin Jarrow, a black-whiskered Demilung. He thought of asking Gibber to tell him where to find Demilungland, but discretion warned him not to do it. Any answer he might have received would have been unreliable. Moreover, such a question might have precipitated a gunfight, which could have ended only in somebody's getting killed.

Inside said, "Thinking you might like to draw?"

"No," said Winters. "I was thinking of going about my business. Good-day, sir." He kneed his horse and continued northward.

When he'd decided that return to Forlorn Gap in time for late supper would require hard riding, he turned around and headed back south. Premonition began to crowd him then.

[*Turn To Page* 84]

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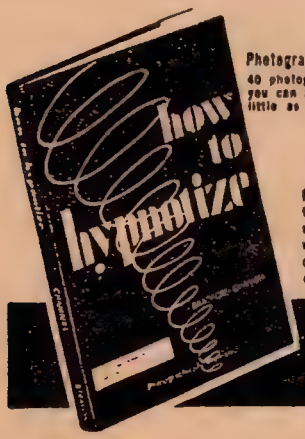


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He developed an eerie feeling that something dreadful was about to happen.

Shortly before sundown he came to what premonition had told him he would find. It was a scene of carnage and desolation.

Close to where he had pulled off to have his noon meal a northbound stagecoach lay tilted on its right side in a wedged position between roadside boulders. One dead horse lay in its harness. Its three teammates, including gear, were missing. Stage driver and guard lay dead, their heads and faces covered with road dust and blood. In a stage seat, a well-dressed passenger lay sprawled grotesquely on his back, a streak of blood clotted below his left eye.

Winters did not dismount to look for sign. It was too plain for that. Many horse tracks led directly westward, leaving a trail a purblind man could have followed.

He was sorry such a trail had been left. Here was crime, and criminals had practically dared him to do something about it. While stalling for time, trying to think of some reason for not doing his plain duty, he swung off and leisurely examined a couple of dead bodies. Both of them were warm. This fact paradoxically cried out for vengeance, yet warned him to flee.

[*Turn To Page* 86]

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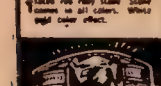
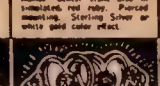
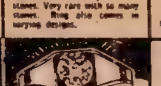


160. Men's large square cut, simulated garnet ring. Yellow or white gold color effect.



152. Sweetheart ring. 2 simulated rubies on matching-toned hearts. Yellow gold color effect.



186. Men's solitaire ring. Large, brilliant 2Kt-size simulated diamond. Fine heavy mounting.

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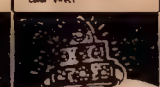
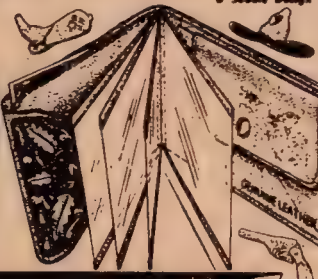


149. Ladies' dinner ring. Unusual design. Large, brilliant, simulated diamond, about 10 smaller stones. White gold color effect or Sterling Silver. Ring also comes in oval or square shape design.

167. Ladies' exquisite cluster dinner ring. 3 large, simulated diamonds and many smaller stones. Sterling Silver or white gold color effect.



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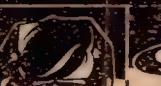

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Gradually, however, further contemplation of this bloody scene which spread harrowingly before him engendered in him a mood stronger than fear. He became angry. He began to feel a fearless urge for revenge. Duty had a powerful ally then.

He remounted and rode westward.

CANYON walls rose higher with his progress, and echoes clattered round him. While there was yet daylight, he urged Cannon Ball into a fast lope and curves and walls sped past them.

Then with vigorous abruptness, he pulled to a halt. He knew now where he was going. A sign told him. On a ledge at his right, so near he could have reached out and touched it, had been placed a human head, a head with a long black beard, its face in color like dark-fired tobacco. A Demi-lung!

Beyond that gruesome milestone he proceeded with caution.

A few hundred yards farther, and he came to another head. This one, too, had long black whiskers.

He paused there and sleeved his face. Fear began to surge and dispute duty and anger for mastery of his behavior. Cannon Ball, finding his reins free, moved ahead slowly of his own will.

Then Winters came upon a third head. By its face he recognized it at once as having belonged to an insolent young scoundrel named Gibber Inside.

[*Turn To Page* 88]

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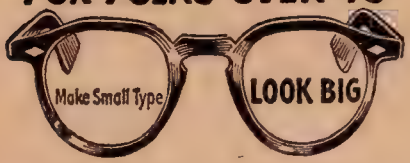


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Gibbergab's insolence had disappeared. Gibber looked somewhat surprised now.

This was about all Winters could stand. He sleeved his face and held tight reins. Yet, while he debated whether to turn back, he heard a voice calling for help.

"Over here," it said. "Help."

Winters suspected a trap. He refused to ride into it. "Where are you?" he yelled.

"Over here. Please help."

"Come out where I can see you." He waited for response. Seconds later a young man with a rifle emerged from a mass of rocks and staggered forward. By twilight Winters slowly recognized him. "Alf Camper!" he exclaimed. "What are you doing here?"

Camper stopped and stared at Winters. "You... You know me?"

Winters said, "I'm Deputy Marshal Lee Winters of Forlorn Gap. You're Alfred Camper. You used to live there. In fact, I saved you several times from getting your ears chewed off. But what are you doing here?"

Camper's head had a bloody spot on its right side. There was a stain on his left sleeve, also. He said dazedly, "Ah, yes, Winters. I remember you well. But they stole my wife, Winters. They left me for dead. I tried to follow them, but I'm afraid it was no use."

"You say *they* stole your wife. Who are *they?*"

"Men like those heads back there. Dark men, with long black whiskers."

"Demilungs," said Winters.

Camper stared, puzzled. "I reckon you mean devils?"

"Could be," said Winters. "Where's your horse?"

"I didn't have any."

"You came this far on foot?"

"Yes."

"No wonder you're blowed. Climb on behind me. We're going to get us

[*Turn To Page* 90]

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some Demilungs." Winters shook off his left stirrup and leaned forward until Camper was on behind him.

Winters urged his horse onward warily.

CAMPER said, "I guess you knew my wife. She and her folks lived in Forlorn Gap. She was Alicia Singer."

"Yeah," said Winters. "What!" he exclaimed as an afterthought. Then as a cover-up for his nervousness, he asked, "What are you folks doing in this country?"

"I've been in Pangborn Gulch. Struck it lucky there. Went back East for Alicia."

"And this Gibbergab Inside-out knew about it?"

"I'm afraid he did. He was galloping up behind our stagecoach when those—those Demilungs hit us. They covered him, too, with their guns. Why they didn't kill him, I don't know. They warned him not to follow, but he followed anyhow. Seems he got two of them before they got him."

Winters made no comment. They had entered what appeared to be a mountain-locked valley. Half a mile ahead burned a campfire. Night had settled darkly and by starlight they could barely see their way. Winters, dreading ambush, turned left and fol-

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lowed a sandy wash until they were within a hundred yards of what appeared dimly as a small group of log huts. They dismounted. Winters tied Cannon Ball's bridle to a dwarfed bush and took an extra gun from his saddlebags.

When a little later they were on higher ground, Camper seized Lee's left arm. "Look. I see her. I see Alicia."

Beyond a nearer hut in an open space stood a crude platform, before which a campfire burned. It was on this platform that Winters now saw Alicia, dressed in colored travel clothes and standing with her hands tied behind her back. Near her was a pedestal on which a candle was being lighted. He who lighted it was a huge character with bushy black hair and a long black beard, its lower end cut square across. He reminded Winters of pictures he'd seen in old history books of bearded men called Assyrians.

When his candle was burning he drew his great shoulders back and shouted, "You have chosen to bid by inch of candle. What bid does Oswin Jarrow hear from you?"

Camper muttered in angry horror, "They're fixing to sell her at auction. But what does inch of candle mean?"

Winters searched his mind. "Inch of candle," he mused. "I've heard of it. Maybe I've just heard my wife read about it. Sure, I remember. They let it burn until one inch has burned away. Bidding stops then, and whoever is high gets her."

By firelight they could now see a semi-circle of seated Demilungs, men with black whiskers, beyond them a few black-robed women. A Demilung lifted his right hand.

"Two ounces of gold," he shouted.

"Three," another shouted.

Auctioneer Jarrow sneered at them, "I'll make it five ounces. I'm

[*Turn Page*]

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prepared to make it more, if need be." He lifted his big fists. "I'll even throw in these, if anybody makes it necessary."

Alfred Camper muttered angrily and leveled his rifle toward Jarrow. "I'm going to kill him."

Winters pressed Camper's gun down. "You might miss." He nodded to his left. "Horses are hitched out there. That nearest one, with firelight flickering on him, belonged to Gibbergab Inside. Get it."

"But why?"

"You're going to ride in after your wife," said Winters. He added, "But not till I tell you when to ride."

CAMPER left and came back leading Gibbergab's fine red horse. "What do I do now?"

"See that small hayrick just ahead? We're going to slip up behind it." They moved up slowly and without noise. "Now," said Winters, "you keep out of sight until I've had a showdown with Jarrow."

"But you can't go in there alone."

"I'm going alone."

Winters stepped out and walked slowly, but straight toward Jarrow's platform. He heard Jarrow yell, "An inch is almost gone. Does anybody else want to bid?"

Winters had come within a few steps of Jarrow. Firelight now revealed him clearly. A sixgun in each hand, Winters shouted coldly, "I bid one ounce of lead. Whoever moves first will get it." He glanced round at black-whiskered characters who had turned their heads and stared at him. He did not count them, though he quickly estimated them at about twenty.

Alicia Singer, now Alicia Camper, looked at him in excited recognition. "Winters!" she cried. Then she trembled with fear. "But run, Winters. These monsters will kill you. They

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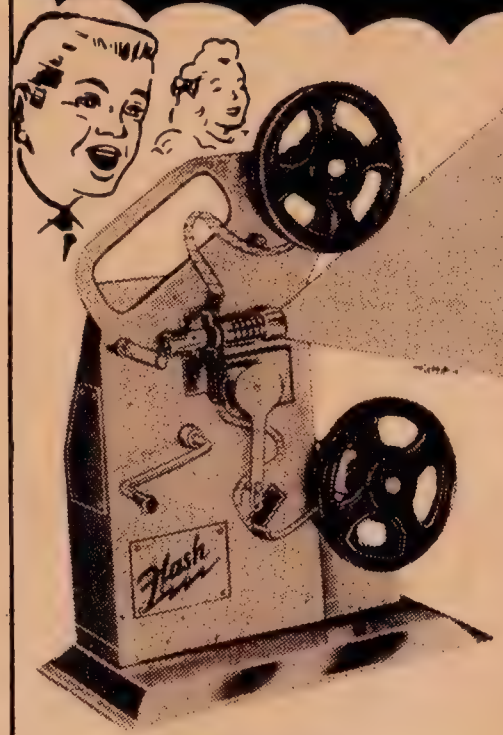

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will kill you and cut off your head."

Winters moved his guns slowly. "It's a question of who wants to be first. Let somebody make a wrong move, and we'll know."

"Oh, Winters," sobbed Alicia, "don't risk your life for me. You've always been my friend, but you've done enough. It doesn't matter now whether I live or die. These monsters have killed my husband. Let them kill me, too. But save yourself, Winters. Then you can come back with an army and destroy them. You can do nothing by yourself."

Winters moved slowly toward Jarrow's platform. He stepped upon it. For no more than an instant had his watchful eye left Jarrow. When near enough for action, he thrust his left-hand gun under his belt, seized Jarrow's candle, blew out its flame and thrust it into a pocket of his leather vest.

As yet no Demilung had said a word. But now Oswin Jarrow snarled at him. "Who is this man called Winters? What did you come here for? You have violated our border line. You will not live to go beyond it again. Our law will not allow it. You have come here to die."

Winters had both of his guns in his hands again. He said, "Jarrow, you are charged with kidnaping and murder. I've got orders to take you, dead or alive. Which way do you want it?"

Jarrow remained sullen for a moment. "I'm unarmed," he said then.

"No, Winters," cried Alicia, "he's got a gun under his coat. I saw him put it there."

"Thank you," said Winters. "But a gun can make no difference. Not with me. For you, Jarrow, it's dead or alive."

Jarrow said, "It's any way you can take me." His right hand went under his coat.

It came out empty. From Winters'

[*Turn To Page 96*]

# ROYAL JELLY, the Queen Bee's Special Food...ITS SECRET OF PROLONGED LIFE!

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Reports from Europe tell of an 80 year old Gentleman whose physical condition would make a 50 year old envious. The man regularly partakes of Royal Jelly. According to a book published in England, when Russian Officials sent questionnaires to all the Centenarians (people over 100 years old) in the Soviet Union, more than half of them turned out to be beekeepers.

From France and Germany come amazing Scientific Reports of outstanding results obtained with Royal Jelly. One French Authority writes of women over 40 feeling increased sexual vitality and of a wonderful feeling of "youth and well-being" that resulted from continued use of Royal Jelly.

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Doc or Paul Niehans, famous Swiss Surgeon and experimenter with Hormones says: "ROYAL JELLY is an activator of the glands"... Dr. Niehans discovered that many-minor disabilities which bother millions of people such as tiredness, irritability, headaches, insomnia, physical and spiritual convulsions, were easy to treat with the Cellular Therapeutics of the Secretion of the bees which we call Royal Jelly.

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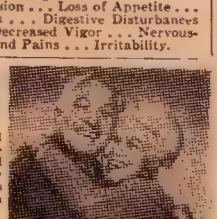

We have listed below some of the extensive Medical and Laboratory research that has been done with Royal Jelly:

Many authorities still dispute the efficacy of Royal Jelly while others consider it a potential Boon to Mankind.

- *Dr. de Pomiade. 2nd International Congress of Biogenetics. Baden-Baden, Germany; April 5, 1956.
- Dr. Maurice Mathias. Pasteur Institute of Tunisia, October, 1952.
- Cowdry's Problems of Aging. Thomas S. Gardner (Reprinted from Journal of Gerontology, Vol. 8, No. 3, July, 1953.)
- Analyses of Royal Jelly and Pollen. Nevin Weaver and Kenneth A. Kuiken (Technical Contribution, No. 1485 Texas Agricultural Experiment Station.)
- Longevity Factors in Royal Jelly. Thomas S. Gardner. (Reprinted from Journal of Gerontology, Vol. 3, No. 1, January, 1948.)

We make no claims for ROYAL JELLY. We have merely accumulated reports that have been made as a result of experimentation and research by Doctors, Scientists and Nutritionists in many parts of the world.

**LEADING MEDICAL AUTHORITIES IN ENGLAND, FRANCE AND GERMANY:** Attest that ROYAL JELLY is one of the richest Natural sources in the treatment of vitamin and nutritional deficiencies...that hogs and guinea pigs fed with Royal Jelly live 20 to 30% longer...chickens fed with Royal Jelly double their egg output.

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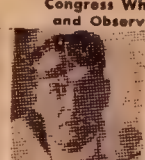
### Observations by Doctors of the Medical Congress Who Took Royal Jelly and Observed Its Use Directly



- Royal Jelly alleviates suffering of men and women in their critical years in a sensational manner.
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- Feeling of tiredness disappears immediately.
- Royal Jelly gives a feeling of increased sexual drive and energy, especially to men and women over 40.
- Glandular studies may lead to new hope for men and women.
- Royal Jelly produces a pleasing state of relaxed well-being and eases tension.

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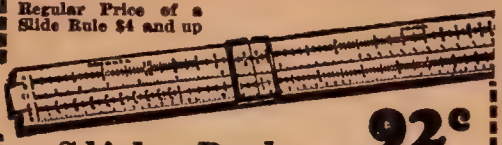

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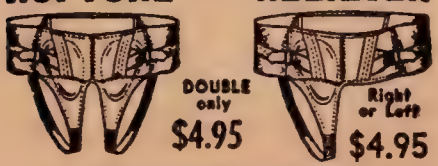

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righthand gun an ounce of lead had passed through Jarrow's head. Lee did not wait for him to fall. He turned and faced other Demilungs who had begun to stir.

"Who wants to be next?" he shouted fiercely.

A rider came pounding up. He moved behind Winters and swung off, a rifle in hand.

Alicia stared at him, then cried, "Alfred! Oh, Alfred, I thought you were dead."

"Untie her hands," said Winters. "Get her on your horse and head out of here."

Camper obeyed hurriedly. "What about you, Winters?"

"I'm staying a while," said Winters. "I may want to kill some more Demilungs."

"Oh, Winters, thank you," said Alicia, when seconds later she and Camper were mounted. "We can never thank you enough."

"Ride," snapped Winters. "This is no time for sentiment." When he'd heard retreating hoofbeats, he stepped down and moved closer to his sullen spectators. He gestured toward one with his right boot. "Stand up." When he had been obeyed, he said, "Toss out your gun." A gun and belt of cartridges dropped at his feet. He continued until eighteen guns lay before him in a pile. "Now turn and walk. Walk away from your houses. Walk and keep walking."

THEY WALKED. He heard muttered curses and threats, but they kept walking.

Winters gathered up their guns and lugged them off toward his waiting horse. He hurried his steps when distance and darkness concealed him. Presently he and Cannon Ball were headed for home. Demilungs and their valley were soon well behind him.

He hoped he might overtake Alf

[*Turn To Page 98*]

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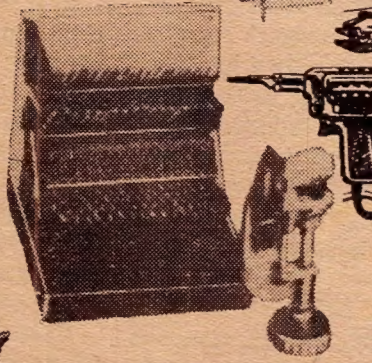

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Camper and his pretty wife Alicia, but they were gone. Not even a distant hoofbeat could be heard.

His canyon ride was uneventful until he came within a short distance of Pangborn Road. There he noticed a small fire which he supposed some prospector had just deserted. He swung off to kick dirt over it, and then he recognized it. This was where he had built a fire himself and broiled bacon for his noon meal. He was puzzled. He had a strange headache, too. He tried to get his thoughts together as he slowly raked dirt with his boot.

He was still troubled as he rode into Forlorn Gap a few minutes before midnight. Nor were his troubles lessened by what he saw.

A stagecoach from Brazerville was grinding to a stop in front of Goodlet Hotel.

Winters, curious, halted to see who was getting off. His mouth dropped open when a happy young couple stepped down. He swallowed as recognition penetrated more painfully into his head. They were Alfred Camper and Alicia Singer, both as trim and happy as could be. In all probability, he thought, neither of them had ever heard of a Demilung.

Winters swung away and seconds later tramped into Bogannon's saloon.

"Winters!" exclaimed Bogie. "I was just about to close. But come in."

"Wine and two glasses, Doc."

"Wine it is, Winters."

They sat at a table and sipped their nightcaps.

Bogie looked curiously at his friend. "Winters, you look sort of bedraggled. What's happened?"

"I was wondering, Doc. Can a boy or girl be in two places at once?"

"You're beyond me, Winters. It's like asking if a man can have a ghost while he's still alive."

"Yeah, so it is." Winters thrust a finger into his left-side vest pocket and came up with a short candle which showed signs of having recently been burned. Had Alicia Singer and Alf Camper been with him in Demilungland? Were there such things as ghosts of living people? Winters studied his candle, then laid it down. "See anything unusual about that, Doc?"

Bogie refused to touch it. He acted as if in fear of trickery. "It looks like an ordinary candle to me."

WINTERS drank more wine then drew his righthand gun. He turned its cylinder slowly, its muzzle at an angle past his eyes. After counting five bullets, he pointed his gun away and ejected one empty shell. He laid this shell before Bogie. "See anything unusual about that?"

Bogie looked at it without touching it. "Not a thing, Winters."

"I think," said Winters, "if you'd look close enough you might find Oswin Jarrow's name on it."

"Jarrow?" said Bogie, puzzled. "Who is he? Or who *was* he?"

"He was that Demilung I was supposed to arrest."

"Oh," said Bogie, remembering. "Did you arrest him?"

Winters, reminded of his throbbing head, took of his hat and felt of his scalp. He found a spot that was slightly swollen and dreadfully sore. "I can't exactly say what happened, Doc." He swallowed a taste of wine and said, "But do you remember my mentioning this morning something about a nightwatchman?"

"Ah," said Bogie. "A nightwatchman who said, *Beware of chidnapers of Timsy?*"

"Right," said Winters. "Now, you tell me whether I heard a nightwatchman or not, and I'll tell you what happened to Oswin Jarrow."

"I don't know," said Bogie uneasily.

"I don't know either," said Winters. He got up and dropped a coin. "But if you'll come outside, Doc, I'll show you more guns than you ever before saw dangling from one horse."

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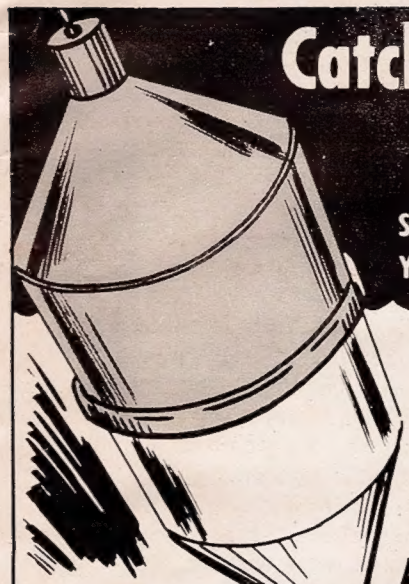

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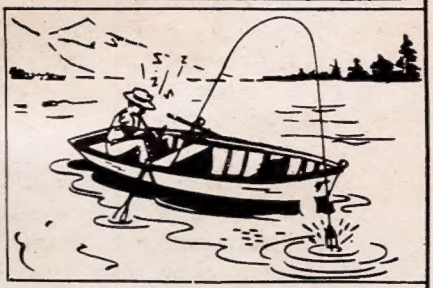

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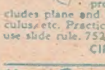

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